

3
—シーキューブ—
CubexCurseoxCurious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さつりがため

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Cube×Cursed×Curious



3
シーキューブ
Cube×Cursed×Curious
VII

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Scene02:日曜日はすとーきんぐ日和

春亮とサヴェレンティのデート。
何も起ころぬはずがない!

「春亮くん、ふさふさの尻尾がー!」



「ふふ……ふさふさのやわらかー!」

フィアが拾ってきたのは……「ギロチン」?



Scene01:ハロー、ギロチン



「ハルに手伝ってほくらんじゅが、あな」

制服姿で黒絵が高校潜人!!

スクール☆ウォーズ
Scene04:～人形原黒絵は退屈しない～



「見る見る! どーだ、
この私のお祭り正装!」

はじめてづくしの夜に起った
大騒動とは……?

はじめてのおまつり／
Scene03: A little reckoning day

Scene06:とある出会いの死亡遊戯



「……人形原黒絵。よろこぶ」

それは、ほんの少しだけ、昔のおはなし。



錐霞が、ネコミミで。
一体何が起ったのか……!?

「じゃあ……みゆこ」

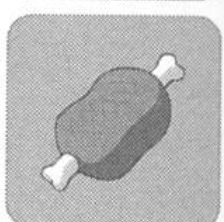
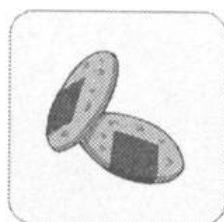
Scene05:上野錐霞を懐かせる方法

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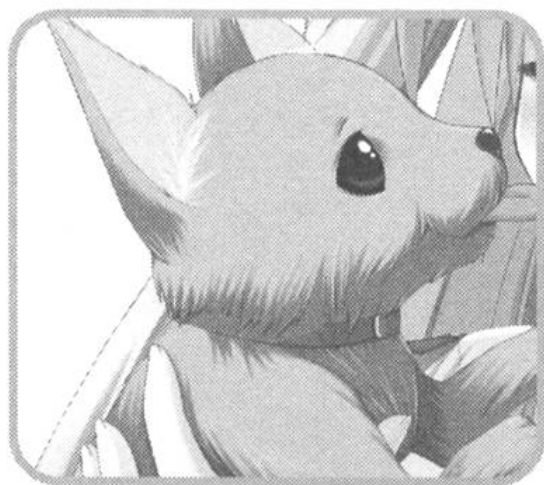
C³ —シーキューブ— Cube×Curse×Curious VII



水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



ハロー、
ギロチン



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 1 - Hello Guillotine

Part 1

One evening on a certain weekend.

"Haruaki, I'm bored out of my mind! I wanna take a walk outside!"

Fear was saying this after one of the common sense lectures conducted whenever there was time—today's being "How to Use the Vacuum Cleaner, Lecture #3 ~The accessory with the pointy tip is not an item for stabbing people to death~"—had ended for some time. Earlier, she had been obediently watching an animal show on television, but now that the show had ended, she seemed to be bored with nothing to do.

Haruaki was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Making a surprised expression, he looked back at her and said:

"Since you're bored, then try finding something to do... Such as helping out with the cooking or the like?"

"I've done that before! How should I put this? I'm not in the mood for helping with cooking right now—That's right! I believe I should broaden my experiences!"

"You make a fair point... But I'm busy cooking right now, so I can't leave the kitchen."

"Why not leave the cooking to Cow Tits?"

Fear swayed her silver hair with displeasure. Standing beside Haruaki, helping out industriously with the cooking, Konoha looked up and said:

"Eh—But Haruaki-kun's cooking still tastes better. Right, if you say you 'don't mind it's not Haruaki-kun's cooking and you want to eat my cooking no matter what!' then I don't mind."

"Muumuu... Hmph, who wants to eat your cooking of full meaty hell? That'll cause the fatal disease that they call m-metabolic syndrome on television. That said, one person already caught it already. Poor thing, there's no hope for her at all..."

"W-Why are you looking at me with tepid eyes?"

The usual back and forth bickering began as always. But at this moment, Fear spoke as though she suddenly had an idea:

"But after more thinking, it's not like I need to have Haruaki by my side. I can manage something as trivial as taking a walk by myself. After all, I'm just going to make one round encircling this house. So can I go for a walk? I can? Okay~ Then I'm off!"

"Hey~ Hold it right there."

"Ooph!"

In any case, Haruaki grabbed her collar first and began to think. Counting from the day this girl was suddenly sent here, quite a few weeks had passed already. Although she was still doing many weird things as always, compared to the beginning, she had already improved greatly. Also, she had started going to school from a while earlier, so she seemed to be slowly getting used to things outside of the house...

Hmm~

Still grabbing onto her collar, Haruaki turned Fear's petite body around and looked her straight in the face.

"Hey, Haruaki you dummy! Let go now, or else I'll curse you!"

"So, you said you want to go for a walk no matter what?"

"Umm—Of course!"

Grumbling, Fear was showing glimmering eyes while nodding vigorously.

"Do you promise that you'll return after making one round in the neighborhood?"

"Yes!"

"Promise you won't run off to somewhere strange?"

"Yes yes!"

"Even if a weirdo calls out to you, you won't pay any attention?"

"Yes yes yes!"

"Then go."

"...! I'll be back before you know it!"

Fear rushed out of the kitchen, leaving only silence behind. Dressed in an apron, Konoha frowned slightly and said:

"Is this okay?"

"After all, she said she's only making one round in the neighborhood. Besides, I can't stay by her side forever, right?"

"Sigh... Well, I just hope she'll return without incident..."

Still feeling worried, Konoha murmured then continued preparing the meal. Her attitude prompted an ominous premonition to suddenly emerge in Haruaki's mind, but it was too late by this point. There should be no problem, right? There must not be a problem, please, no problems... As much as these worries gradually increased in his mind, Haruaki still picked up the kitchen knife again.

However—Based on the result...

Fear's walk this time was precisely the root cause of the later commotion.

Part 2

During dinner in the living room...

"U-Umm, Haruaki, can I eat in my room today?"

"What? Definitely no way. It's a different matter if you're living in the accessory dwelling, but we're living in the same home after all. So long as you're not ill in bed, having meals together is one of this family's rules."

"Muu... No exceptions?"

"Why do you want to eat in your room so much?"

"N-Nothing, okay! It's not like... I particularly... wanna... eat in... my room. Also, I only asked because the thought suddenly occurred to me. In fact, there's no special meaning! Wahaha!"

Fear laughed in a clearly unnatural manner then reached out with her chopsticks towards the dishes on the table.

(Hmm... Her behavior is too suspicious.)

Haruaki did not know when exactly she had returned from her walk. After coming home, she had stayed cooped up in her room doing something secretly. Even when he asked her how she felt about her walk, she simply replied with a weird answer of "N-Nothing much, not especially good or bad!" Having gone off on her walk with such enthusiasm, Haruaki expected her to report back happily on various sundry happenings.

"Muu, oh right."

Picking at the dishes as though distracted in thought, Fear suddenly looked up. Her glimmering eyes seemed to be saying "eureka!" Then she said:

"Midnight snack. That's right, I want a midnight snack. Haruaki, roll some rice balls!"

"Hmm? Oh, I can't for today. We don't have much rice left and the amount remaining is barely enough for breakfast tomorrow... You should eat your fill now during dinner so that you don't need a midnight snack."

"Also, why don't you sleep earlier instead of staying up late?"

"M-Muuuuuu..."

Fear's whimpers of displeasure only increased Haruaki and Konoha's doubts.

Then after dinner ended, it was time for tea.

Like a lawyer raising an objection to a judge, Fear knocked on the table and said:

"I demand double the usual amount of rice crackers for today's tea time snack! Four pieces! I want four!"

"What? Don't you have your own personal rice crackers in your room?"

"I finished them long ago! So I need to get the amount I will be eating next!"

"Didn't I give you a pack yesterday? I told you not to consume them too quickly."

"That's because, umm, there's an unpredicted situation... No! In any case, that's what I demand!"

Konoha sipped tea calmly while throwing a slanted glance at Fear's desperate pleading.

"Haruaki-kun, you must not give in to her demands no matter what. Otherwise, she'll simply keep asking for more."

"Well said. So you'll just have to make do with two. Here you go."

"What!?"

Receiving the two rice crackers, Fear was shaking with her head bowed, her silver hair quivering—

"Damn it, whatever! You dummy!"

She rushed out of the living room in a huff. As her inexplicable shouts of "The shameless brat is struck with shameless disease! Cow Tits' boobs are such an eyesore, they should deflate—" gradually receded, the sound of a paper door slamming shut was heard last.

"...What's with her? Although it's completely normal for her to be begging for rice crackers, today's behavior is a bit strange."

"So true~ But that child acting weird is also commonplace. Logically speaking, there is no problem."

Konoha looked exasperated as she poured tea into her cup. At that moment, she eyed her own bosom.

"...That child always says that... Could it really come true...?"

"What's the matter?"

"Eh? Umm, uh... Hmm! This is a good chance, I guess I'll muster my courage to try asking."

"Okay."

"Umm... My bosom, is it... really... an eyesore...?"

"Pfft!"

What kind of senseless question was that? Haruaki desperately tried to stop tea from spurting out of his mouth but could not stop his gaze from being drawn to "that part" while Konoha's body twisted from

embarrassment. The way she cradled her bosom with her arms caused that body part to look even more magnificent—

"No! Actually... it's not... an eyesore. I think... it's quite nice. Not an eyesore at all."

Konoha's face suddenly flushed red, then she awkwardly shook her braids.

"Is that so... Aha, I seem to have asked something weird. Please erase this from your memory and pretend I never asked."

"O-Okay. I also find my answer quite weird, so please forget it as well..."

As though trying to hide her embarrassment, Konoha drank her tea in one breath. But then she suddenly frowned, causing Haruaki to ask: "Did something happen?"

"No... I seem to be hearing something strange. Perhaps it's just my imagination."

Konoha answered in her gentle smile as usual. Then saying "Okay, I must work even harder," she stood up. After Haruaki asked in puzzlement:

"What do you need to work harder at?", Konoha replied:

"Because the teacher assigned a whole pile of homework that needs to be finished quickly by Monday, unless I divide it up to work on for today and tomorrow, it'll be quite tough... Haruaki-kun, didn't your class get homework?"

Part 3

A couple dozen minutes later, Haruaki was clutching his head, agonizing before his desk in his room.

"Gah, I can't believe I forgot all about it...!"

Clearly, he could not ask the teacher to reduce his homework load using excuses such as "My father never came back after going abroad, meaning I must do all the house work. If I had to mention another thing, there's a silver-haired girl living in my home." What a pain, what a great pain. In Haruaki's view, homework was contemptible for taking away time from important house chores.

(I'll need to finish this handout by today. I need to go shopping tomorrow and it's quite rare for me to feel motivated enough to clean the entire house thoroughly.)

Haruaki's grades were neither great nor terrible. But the enemy known as "formulae" was quite formidable, halting the advance of his homework progress.

"Hmm, I don't get this. I'd better ask Konoha...? No wait, she's quite strict about homework~ Looks like I should try my best on my own... But still... I... don't... get it..."

Just as Haruaki was hunching forward, feeling his strength drained, he thought "No way, I'm gonna fall asleep if this continues" and stretched. Suddenly, the paper door behind him shook. Someone was knocking. Haruaki casually answered "Come in."

"Umm... Is it okay if I come in?"

It was Fear. Haruaki glanced back at the sound of the paper door sliding open and saw her standing there with a timid look. Shoulder hunched, hands behind her back, she gingerly looked towards him.

"I'm quite tied up but whatever. Anyway, it won't affect my progress that much."

"Okay... Then I'm coming in."

"Sure, what's up?"

Thinking "she's probably coming for something like extra rice crackers," Haruaki turned towards the desk again. As the thought of "I'd better work hard and sort out this question, it's very important" crossed his mind, Haruaki proceeded to continue his duel against the handout, still covered in blanks.

At this moment, he heard the paper door slide shut behind him while Fear walked over to him timidly and slowly on the tatami floor.

"I have a something... I need your help with."

"Mmm-hmm."

"No, rather... It's something that must be said, that's what I mean."

"Okay."

Haruaki simply responded indifferently. However, Fear's quiet voice was slowly approaching his back—

"I—may have done something wrong."

"Really really... Huh?"

Only now did Haruaki notice the atmosphere of dissonance. Fear's tone of voice sounded very serious with a hint of worry. This was definitely not the voice she used in her usual willfulness when demanding rice crackers. Instead, it was more sincere, more unusual—Indeed, it was as though she was forcing out a message from the very depths of her heart—

"I really can't... bear it any longer... So..."

Haruaki felt warm breath against his ear. Why was she... leaning in... so close? An inexplicable sense of pressure made him afraid to look back. All he could hear was irregular panting. He could imagine Fear blushing, breathing irregularly, her lips approaching his ear—What the heck did she want to do exactly?

"Arghhhh... How did explaining what happened become so hard? Anyway, it's this. What I want to tell you is this. So, Haruaki, could you turn your head towards me..."

Haruaki did not dare turn his head. The mechanical pencil in his hand also began to shake. The mathematics handout, originally considered a tough enemy, would be mere fodder worth only 1EXP in comparison. Good heavens~ How did it come to this? Running away from fodder was possible but not for boss characters.

"Ahh..."

"What?"

Haruaki now felt a new sensation against his ear. Amidst the nonstop panting, a soft and slightly wet object was moving back and forth against his earlobe, gently and carefully—No mistake about that.

His ear was being licked.

"W-Woah! W-What are you doing, Fear!? Listen carefully, you must calm down. I don't really get what this is about, but you must first calm down! You must be temporarily out of your mind, right?"

"...Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Stop going 'huh,' okay!?"

Despite his serious confusion, Haruaki still managed to activate the willpower dormant in the depths of his brain cells, turning his head to look all at once. The result—

Lick~

For some reason, the tongue that was even nearer than Fear's voice gave Haruaki's nose a forceful lick.

"Woof woof! ...H-H-Huff!"

Held in Fear's outstretched hands, an especially cute little animal was currently wagging its tail vigorously.

Part 4

In any case...

Fear had apparently picked up a puppy during her walk.

"Oh... I see? That's what happened..."

Haruaki smiled radiantly while pointing to a different direction:

"Put the dog back where you found it."

"What!? Are you even human? How could you be so heartless!? No way, no way, I—DON'T—WANNA—! Because this little guy is so fuzzy and soft! You've really disappointed me, Haruaki!"

Fear hugged the puppy tightly in both arms and hunched herself as though trying to protect it from Haruaki's harm.

"You... How could you just suddenly start keeping a dog?"

Konoha spoke with her hand against her temple. Like Haruaki and Fear, she was sitting at the living room table. Hearing all the commotion, she had left her room to ask what was happening at the living room.

"I-It's not like I'm asking for your opinion, Cow Tits! Like me, you're not the master of the house, so you don't have any authority to decide... No wait!

Dangerous! You're very dangerous! You meat demon! Could it be that y-you wanna eat him?"

"...I'm not going to eat him."

Seeing Fear hide the puppy behind her with a worried expression, Konoha reacted with a twitch on the edge of her face. Perhaps thinking that the discussion would definitely be derailed if she blew up at Fear right now, Konoha was probably suppressing her emotions. What amazing self-control.

"However, now at least I understand why you're behaving so suspiciously. So you just wanted to get food for him... And you also fed your original stash of rice crackers to him."

"Muu... That's right. But it feels like it's not enough for him... Also, I was thinking I can't keep hiding him, so I wanted to try discussing with you..."

Fear curled herself up. Haruaki went "hmm" and examined the dog held in her embrace.

A small-sized dog with lovely colored fur. Not very knowledgeable about dogs, Haruaki did not know what breed the dog was but got the impression it was foreign. In other words, the dog looked very expensive... To think this kind of dog would be abandoned.

It was also wearing a collar that seemed to have the owner's telephone there but could not be read due to serious abrasive damage. Most likely, it was done on purpose before abandoning the dog.

"What should we do in this kind of situation? I guess we should contact the police? If we call the police, they should be able to seek out the original owner, right?"

"I dunno~"

"...If they don't help find the owner, then what?"

"Well... Probably find a new owner... But if a new owner cannot be found..."

Haruaki did not finish. As a result, even though Fear was unfamiliar with how Japan dealt with stray dogs, she still received an ominous impression. Greatly alarmed, she hugged the dog even tighter.

"I think letting him stay and keeping him as a pet is the best solution! It must be! Come on Haruaki, please, please! I'll listen to whatever you say from now on and obey any command. Even if you ask me to scrub your back in the bathroom like last time, I'll do it! It's embarrassing, but I'll bear it!"

"You clearly did that on your own without my permission!"

Completely ignoring Haruaki's retort, Fear frowned and kept pestering "Pretty please? Pretty please?" as she brought her face up close, almost touching his nose. Haruaki frantically cast his gaze to the side and happened to look into the eyes of the puppy in her arms.

Big, round eyes. Innocent look. The puppy's unwary expression displayed its trust in these three people as it tilted its head blankly as though stating that malevolence did not exist in this world.

(Ooh...)

Haruaki felt his heart getting shot by something. Argghhh, damn it, so cute~ If we abandon this little guy, he'll really be pitifully alone. On television, it was also reported that dogs at shelters only had a very low percentage of getting adopted~ Please be more kind, people of Japan. And I'm Japanese too, ahhhhh.

"Nuu... Gggg..."

"Haruaki, what's the matter, Haruaki~?"

Fear continued to ask to be spoiled while staring at Haruaki from the right, the left and down below while he was frozen, head bowed. She tugged at his sleeve like a little child. Although Haruaki did not react to her gestures, he slowly looked up after a short while.

"If we release him outside now... It'll be us who are abandoning him... Right?"

"—! Th-That's right, that's what it'll end up being!"

"Anyway, yeah, let's do it this way first. We'll try asking classmates at school first. Perhaps someone might be willing to adopt him. Before that, let him stay here for now... Perhaps... that might... be better."

"O-O-O-O-O-Of course we need to do that! We are responsible! And I get the feeling it'd be best if no one adopts him. Rather, there won't be, but

don't mind that! Before we find someone to adopt him, we must protect him!"

"...Then it's decided."

Although Haruaki saw Konoha sigh helplessly on the side, he pretended not to see. On the other hand, Fear instantly stood up in all smiles, lifting the puppy up like a trophy.

"Waha—! Wonderful, from today on, you'll be a member of this family! Uh—Right, we need a name! We need to name him first!"

"Pooch is basically the most commonly used in Japan."

"What kind of tasteless statement is that! This guy is like family that I found. Right, so I wanna give him a name that's clearly related to me the moment you hear it... Uh..."

Fear lifted and spun the puppy for a while. The puppy barked in concert with the act. Then Fear suddenly stopped and grinned as though saying "This is perfect!"

"Yes! Your name is—Guillotine!"

"Th-That's the worst name!"

"What—You don't like it... By the way, the second candidate is Iron Maiden."

"No no no no~"

Haruaki did not even know where to begin. Just as he waved his hand before his face, Fear started to explain the meaning on her own.

"Oh~ Right, I forgot to confirm something important... Hmm, she's female. Then there's no problem. No wait, this means that the second candidate is more fitting? But Guillotine sounds more catchy..."

Holding the puppy under its forearms, Fear muttered and looked between its legs. At this moment, the sounds of a cheesy drama could be heard from the television that had been on all this time. 'Shouji-san! I love you!' 'Shouko... I'm sorry.'—Hearing these lines, Fear nodded vigorously with a sudden realization.

"I see. So Japanese names have rules of gender variations, right? Then out of respect for Haruaki, I'll follow the basic rules of this country. In that case... Let's call her Guillotine-ko."

"This name is so bad it's unbelievable! In all sorts of ways!"

"Why are you complaining so much? Otherwise, what should I do?"

"Sigh... Just call her Guillotine, it basically sounds like a French name..."

"Then why didn't you say so from the start?"

Although Fear pouted in her reply, she was still quite happy and even gave her blessing by singing "Guillotine~ Guillotine~ Guilotiiiiine—!" in her own improvised melody... Should she be stopped?

However, there was still one person present who was not pleased by the blessing.

"I cannot accept this."

"...Konoha?"

Sitting formally in seiza with narrowed eyes, Konoha continued in a calm but forceful voice:

"I understand Haruaki-kun has a heart of kindness. However, you must reflect more on your situation. You clearly have no idea how to take care of a dog and your schedule is already packed from handling household matters and school. If you increase your burdens any further... There will be a problem."

"C-Cow Tits! I'll take care of Guillotine myself, so there!"

"You want to take care of her when you're lacking in basic common sense? Don't be ludicrous. Surely, Haruaki-kun will end up taking care of the dog in your place."

This comment really sliced to the core of the matter. As much as Fear wanted to object, she clearly knew her lack of common sense. Consequently, she could only gnash her teeth while glaring at Konoha.

"No, uh—Umm, Konoha...? You should know too that we can't just throw her out, right?"

"But it is also true that we cannot afford keeping her. I'm really reluctant to say this but it's not like feeding a dog doesn't cost money. And we can't skimp on shots and vaccines, right? Our home expenses have increased ever since this child's arrival. Do we have excess cash to spend in this area?"

"Ugh!"

The very correct argument of budget issues stabbed mercilessly into Haruaki's chest. Hence, amidst the heavy atmosphere on scene, Konoha stood up slowly and looked at Haruaki and Fear coldly.

"Please allow your brains to calm down, then consider things carefully. Of course, it needs to be a solution apart from keeping the dog as a pet. I will ponder carefully during bath time as well—We'll discuss again after my bath."

Saying that without allowing any objections, Konoha walked out of the living room, leaving Haruaki and Fear to exchange glances.

"What do we do, Fear?"

"This pisses me off, damn Cow Tits! Is her massive bust our final obstacle!?"

"No, it's got nothing to do with busts."

"Hold on, I've got a plan... Fufu, my eyes cannot be deceived...!"

Haruaki watched in puzzlement as Fear clenched her fists and muttered emphatically.

Held in Fear's hands, Guillotine also tilted her head as though imitating Haruaki's posture.

Part 5

"Eh?"

When Konoha returned to the living room after her bath, she found Guillotine pacing about on the table, bored with nothing to do. Haruaki and Fear were not present. Were they having a planning meeting in a room?

"Even so, they shouldn't leave this child unattended... Are they really serious in keeping her as a pet?"

Entering the living room, Konoha grumbled while hanging the towel she had been using to dry her hair on her shoulder. As a result, Guillotine looked up at her as though saying "You're back?"

Konoha's face twitched. Exuding an aura of extreme chill, Konoha glared viciously.

She simply moved her eyes to survey her surroundings. Right side OK, left side OK, bottom O~K~.

"Woof!"

Tugging at heart strings.

"Woof woof!"

More tugging at heart strings.

".....Hmm?"

Konoha's endurance reached its limit.

"Ahhh~ Jeez, how should I say this? Ahhh~ Jeez!"

With lightning speed, fast enough to leave afterimages, Konoha picked up Guillotine and started rubbing her face against the puppy. Guillotine struggled desperately, caught in her cleavage, waving its short little limbs in suffering.

"Wow~ So soft~ So warm~ ...Ufu, ufufu. Ufufu ehehe."

"Choke choke."

"Wa!"

Konoha frantically rescued Guillotine from being buried in her cleavage, then brought the puppy close to her face, almost touching their noses together. Then out from her lips came:

"Ohhh... Sorry about just now, woof~ Please forgive me, woof!"

Some kind of vague and mysterious doggy speak.

"However, we still can't add to Haruaki-kun's troubles. I really pity you, but asking the police to handle it is the best way, woof... A cute little puppy like you will definitely get adopted. Ahhh, even so, what if no one adopts you—sniff sniff, woof woof, what should we do, woof?"

"Woof woof!"

No one knew if these two beasts' hearts were connected as they stared at each other and barked back and forth.

Just at this moment, the wall closet behind Konoha slid open—

"Kukkukku..."

Shocked, Konoha stopped what she was doing. Then trembling slightly, she looked behind her.

Behind the slightly ajar paper door, half of Fear's face could be seen inside the closet, grinning maliciously. On the upper shelf of the closet, Haruaki could be seen as well. He was staring with his eyes wide open. Still maintaining the same expression, Fear murmured:

"...Please forgive me, woof!"

"H-Huwaaaaa..."



Right before their eyes, Konoha's face grew redder and redder—

This instant ended up becoming the critical moment when a new member was added to the family.

Part 6

Then the next day, Sunday, the breakfast table was more lively than usual.

"Good doggy, so obedient. Eat eat, have some more. Ufufu, she keeps eating nonstop."

"On further thought, it's quite lucky that we weren't eating Hamburg steaks last night~ Just the thought of you feeding her in secret sends chills down my spine."

"How so?"

"Dogs cannot eat onions or else they'll get poisoned."

"Haha, what stupidity coming from a shameless brat. Why are you making such an unfunny joke?"

"..."

"...It's actually true?"

"Look here, Guillotine-chan, there's tasty food over here too~"

"Nuu, Cow Tits! I won't let you steal a march on feeding her!"

"This is not stealing a march. Since we have decided to keep her, I will make sure she does not become Haruaki-kun's burden. I shall take very good care of her."

"Guillotine, c'mere, that girl there could very well say dangerous things like 'However, you look even more tasty, woof!' Seriously, 'woof' this 'woof' that, it's totally disgusting."

"Uwaaaah... Erase it! I demand that memory be erased!"

Fear and Konoha bickered with each other as usual while handing edible-looking morsels of rice and side dishes to Guillotine. The puppy kept wagging her tail happily and running about beside or under the table.

(Hmm—It's quite chaotic... I wonder what it'll be like if Kuroe returns.)

Recalling another resident who was not yet back from her travels, Haruaki felt a sense of heartwarming due to Guillotine while he ate breakfast. Ahhh~ What a healing feeling.

But at that moment, the news on television reported "Up next, a recent problem of frequent thefts of high-class pets..." To think that there were people who went to such lengths. In just a day, the Yachi household had already grown so attached to Guillotine—were a longtime pet to be stolen, what a huge blow would be dealt to a family.

Just as Haruaki was thinking "we'd better be careful too"—

"Okay, she's full! Haruaki, let's go for a walk! A walk!"

"Yeah, let's do a bit of shopping along the way... Are there any pet shops nearby?"

The trio quickly cleaned up the dishes and prepared to go out. The dazzling sun was high up in the sky, seeming as though it were blessing the Sunday it had not seen for seven days. The weather, so uncharacteristically hot for autumn, was making everyone begin to sweat.

"Is it okay without a leash? Although we'll buy one at the pet shop."

"Should be okay, right? She seems to be quite attached to us already... Hwah~"

"Ohoh~ What a massive yawn. You must have slept little, playing with Guillotine instead?"

"It's him who's not letting me sleep. As soon as I go to bed, he keeps licking my ears and neck, leaving me no choice but to hug and stroke him. Fufu, despite being awake, it makes me feel like I'm in a dream."

"...So jealous..."

"Hey, you forgot to add 'woof,' Cow Tits."

"How much longer are you going to keep bringing that up?"

Conversing like that, the trio left the house. They noticed there seemed to be a shadow behind a nearby utility pole.

It was a man who was wearing a trench coat with a soft hat pulled down low despite the hot weather. Although Haruaki's group found him intriguing,

staring at him would not be polite. As soon as Fear released Guillotine on the ground, they set off.

Despite their worries, Guillotine did not dash off out of sight. Instead, she took steps one by one at her own pace. The trio followed her while talking:

"Wow, so hot. How could that guy dress like that without fainting from the heat?"

"Maybe it's on his own insistence? Because yesterday as well, he was wearing the same thing."

"...Yesterday as well?"

"Yeah, when I was taking a walk, he was walking around in the area. I saw him a few times."

"—Really? I see."

Relatively quiet during this time, Konoha spoke with a voice as cold as a glacier for some reason.

"I would have thought that one would only say this in a movie or a comic book, but apparently not. Fear-san, Haruaki-kun, listen to me quietly without looking back—We're being followed."

"What...?"

Haruaki was just about to look back nervously but he managed to suppress the urge. Suddenly, his feet felt heavy and difficult to move.

"W-Who is it? For what purpose?"

"It should be the trench coat man we were just talking about."

"No way? Are those people from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion chasing after me again?"

Fear's voice sounded stiff. Konoha shook her head and said:

"Shouldn't be them. Also, this guy's skills in following are very poor."

"Then why else would he do this? I can't think of any other reason for us to be followed..."

"But we are definitely being followed. By that suspicious man who could whip out a gun from inside his coat at any time."

In that case, there must be a reason. Haruaki racked his brain to figure out why—

Then he recalled something he had heard earlier.

"Fear, let me ask you something... How exactly did you discover Guillotine?"

"Hmm? I saw him wandering around, so I reached out to pet him, then he started sticking to and following me. So I thought I might as well bring him home... Is there a problem?"

"Eh—He wasn't abandoned in a cardboard box or anything like that?"

Fear was tilting her head as though she did not understand what a cardboard box was. Haruaki made a sideways glance towards Konoha and said:

"Gah, I knew it... Konoha, do you remember what the news said just now? About high-class pets frequently getting stolen recently."

"Oh... Could it be that she was not abandoned but ran away on her own after being stolen, maybe...?"

"By the way, it's quite suspicious to begin with to think that such an expensive and adorable puppy would get abandoned—And now, we have an extremely suspicious guy following us. Hmm, I'm more and more convinced that we're involved in something troublesome."

An escaped pedigree dog. A theft group trying to recapture her. One's imagination easily connected foul play without any trouble.

"Although I'm totally lost by the conversation, that means the man behind us is a bad guy? Muu."

"What should we do? There are many solutions at hand, but it depends on whether we draw him to a deserted place? Or do we just turn back home?"

Hearing Konoha, Fear clenched her fists and said emotionally:

"Your ideas are too mild! Anyway, that guy's target is Guillotine, right? Then let's just ask him immediately what he wants!"

"Ah... Hey, hold it, Fear!"

Before Haruaki could stop her, Fear had already turned around and rushed off. Noticing her action, Guillotine barked and chased after her. Reacting a step slower, Haruaki and Konoha had no choice but to follow.

Just as they saw at their home entrance, the man was still hiding behind a utility pole. Perhaps scared by the approaching strange silver-haired girl, he jumped all at once.

"Hey, what are you trying to do here!?"

"..."

Instantly, the man tried to escape but Fear's severe glaring halted his movements. Due to the soft hat that was worn low, his expression still could not be seen.

Soon after, the man swiftly reached into the inside of his coat—Then he stopped.

He can't be allowed to take that hand out—This strange thought filled Haruaki's mind.

At this moment, the two sides observed each other's intentions. The tension left no room for a breather while time kept flowing away.

Then the first to break the balance was—

"Woof!"

Guillotine had been wagging her tail all this time. After perking her ears and barking once, she suddenly ran to another place.

"...Ah! What's the matter, Guillotine?"

Although Fear displayed concern for the man's movements for an instant, in the end, she chose to chase after Guillotine. Baring her fangs to threaten the man, she swayed her silver hair and ran forward.

"Ah... Wait up, you!"

"Konoha, let's chase Guillotine first for now! It'd be bad if something happens to her!"

Although the man was concerning, he had not done anything of ill intent. Even if they captured him, he could simply play dumb. Haruaki chased after Fear while glancing back. The man still had his hand in the trench

coat. Standing in the same spot, he seemed to be shaking his body as though hesitating on his next move. It looked like the worst case scenario of him using the opportunity to attack was not going to happen.

Guillotine did not slow down and even ran with leaping steps. Despite possessing physical capabilities surpassing ordinary humans, Fear and Konoha still could not catch up to him.

"Huff, hoo~ W-What on earth is happening...?"

"No idea! ...Hey, wait up—! Guillotine!"

Although already numbed to the feeling, Haruaki still found the name quite weird. And for a striking girl like Fear to be yelling that name desperately in the streets—Haruaki prayed for her not to attract too much attention while running as hard as he could through the quiet residential neighborhood. Just as he chased Guillotine down a fork in the road and rushed up a long and narrow slope—

"Oh, it's a dead end...?"

There was a building on the right hand side while a concrete-reinforced cliff stood on the left. Extending further ahead, the road ended abruptly with a lower area where the tops of trees with red leaves could be seen. Acting as a fence, it would cause Guillotine to stop there—However, concluding that would be premature.

"Woof woof!"

"Eh?"

Contrary to what Haruaki expected, the situation got even worse. Using her running speed to take a leap, Guillotine jumped onto the branches of the trees. Although Guillotine's unsteady steps looked quite precarious, she still managed to walk from one end of the branch to the other end.

"Ah, it's dangerous, Guillotine! Wait up, I'll also—"

"Hey Fear! You definitely won't make it! The branch will snap!"

"A-Anyway, go down first!"

"Then let us get down there quickly!"

"Uwah, don't drag me... Ooph!"

Fear forced Haruaki to jump down as though carrying him on her shoulders. Instantly, the impact of hitting the ground was transmitted directly to his belly. However, now was not the time to be complaining.

This was a place resembling a long and narrow park. A fence in front of them was facing the platform where they had jumped down from. On the other side of the fence was a river roughly two irrigation canals wide where a large volume of water was flowing. On the edge of the park and with branches extending to the very limit was the tree where Guillotine had jumped to.

Guillotine was standing near the front tip of the branch and staring forward. The flexible branch and the leaves swayed in the wind. The way the branch looked like it could break any moment was increasingly worrying.

"Hey, Guillotine! It's dangerous there, hurry and come down!"

"Maybe she isn't able to come down on her own...?"

"That'd be bad. If only there was something long, like a wooden plank or something... Uh..."

"I see, so that's why she jumped onto there. In that case..."

Konoha surveyed the surroundings while she spoke. Fear nodded vigorously in sudden realization then reached into her pocket—What she took out was her emulated form.

In accordance to her will, the Rubik's cube emulated her original form. Emulation start—The giant steel cube appeared for only an instant—

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»—Curse Calling!"

The cube transformed while Fear called out. The cube's components of countless mechanisms instantly shifted and rearranged themselves to manifest a drill extending from her palm and connected to a chain of cubes. Fear took a brief look at it—the object that was only used to harm humans in the past—

Then she forcefully extended it towards Guillotine on the tree.

"Okay Guillotine, come over here! D-Don't be afraid."

"What a sec, your words and actions are very contradictory! It's quite ridiculous!"

"Didn't Cow Tits say that something long is needed!? Jeez, otherwise, do I change it to «A Hatchet of Lingchi»?"

"What difference would that make? What are we going to do if someone sees this? Hurry up and put it away!"

Konoha spoke frantically but luckily, there was no one else in the surroundings and it looked like the strange torture tool had yet to be discovered. However, just as Fear was muttering, intending to turn the drill back into the Rubik's cube—

Perhaps scared by the shiny drill or for some other reason.

Guillotine suddenly jumped away.

Using the intensely shaking branch as the jumping point, the puppy traced out a beautiful parabola.

Guillotine thrashed her four legs in the air while flying over the fence, finally falling into the river beside. However, the river was flowing rapidly. Despite her desperate attempts to swim doggy style, the puppy began to sink into the current repeatedly.

"Ahhhh!"

"See, it's your fault for scaring her with that thing!"

"Y-You're being noisy! I only did it with good intentions, you have no right to criticize since you did nothing! ...Are you okay, Guillotine? I'm going to save you straight away—!"

"W-Wait up, Fear! I remember you can't swim—"

Before she could hear Haruaki, Fear had already leapt over the fence, falling into the water with a great splash. However—

"Gurgle gurgle glug glug!"

"Didn't I say so already!? Konoha, hold onto these for me... My cellphone and wallet!"

"W-Wait... Dear heavens, why am I getting an annoying sense of deja vu?"

Haruaki ignored Konoha's remark and also went over the fence, jumping into the icy cold river.

Fear's situation was even worse than Guillotine's. Gulping down water repeatedly, she was getting tossed around in the river. Perhaps due to her desperate struggling with her arms and legs, she did not sink suddenly. That said, it felt like it was only a matter of time.

Haruaki carefully caught up to Fear without letting himself sink and placed himself under her shoulder.

"Hey, don't act so rashly!"

"Haruaki, just support me like this! Just a little closer... Nu, ku... Great!"

"Woof!"

"Hey Guillotine, don't move about... Fufu, it's okay now—Relax and entrust yourself to me—glug glug!"

"Eek! Hey Fear! Even if you don't know how to swim, at least use your arms to paddle! If you don't do anything, you'll sink 100% for sure! Because you're super heavy!"

"Shut up! My arms aren't free, this can't be helped! Also, calling me heavy is not allowed, dummy—!"

Fear devoted her full effort to kicking her legs to avert the crisis of sinking. However, this did not change the fact that they were facing a life and death situation. Two people and a dog were bobbing up and down as they struggled with buoyancy while being washed downstream in the river. If this continued, their stamina was going to run out.

Just at this moment, Konoha's voice was heard coming from somewhere.

"Fear-san, you should release Guillotine first! That child should have some level of swimming ability!"

"How can I do that!? And it's not guaranteed that she'll be able to reach the shore!"

"Even so, getting everyone drowned is not a solution... Ahhh~ Seriously, if that's the case, I have no choice but to do this!"

Next came a loud, crashing noise. Haruaki looked back desperately to see Konoha standing on the shore, having chopped with her bare hands. In

front of her was a newly severed tree stump where the trunk had fallen towards the river. This formed a bridge that happened to be waiting for Haruaki to flow towards.

"Haruaki-kun, grab onto this first! I'll pull you guys up immediately!"

"Oh okay, yes!"

Haruaki reached out desperately to grab onto the tree trunk that was not too far above the water. Perhaps because his hand was too wet or Fear in his arm was too heavy, his hand immediately slipped off.

"Woah!"

Two people and a dog flowed along the current under the trunk. This could not be helped. But in the that instant—

"Mechanism No.14 raking type, beast's claw form: «Cat's Paw»!"

Cradling Guillotine in one arm, Fear used her other hand to take out the Rubik's cube, which transformed into a torture tool resembling a massive rake. Then she instantly swung the hooked claws at the tip towards the tree trunk.

She almost caught it, but was an instant too slow. The claws only scratched the trunk, shaving off a thin later of bark.

Konoha screamed and Fear began to swear. Haruaki reached out wistfully towards the lifesaving bridge that gradually became further and further away—

Right then, he felt a powerful impact.

Looking up, he saw someone standing on the trunk, reaching out to grab Fear's weapon.

The man in the trench coat.

"...Ugh! H-Hurry and come up, the two of you!"

Did it fly off because he rushed over hastily? The soft hat on his head was gone. However, Haruaki could guess the reason why he kept his hat pushed down low.

Because the furtive middle-aged man was bald.

Part 7

With the man's help, they finally got back ashore. Due to being completely soaked by the river water, their bodies had become especially heavy. Konoha frantically crossed the river from the tree trunk and only breathed a sigh of relief once she saw that they were unharmed.

At this moment, another figure appeared at the river side.

"Oh, Rasputin!"

"Woof woof woof!"

Hugging the dog in all smiles was a boy who appeared to be an elementary schooler. He was holding something like a whistle in his hand.

"Oh, could that be a... dog whistle...?"

A whistle that could not be heard by the human ear. Reportedly, dogs could be trained to receive signals from the owner through them... Guillotine probably started dashing suddenly because she heard the whistle.

Suddenly, Haruaki noticed the trench coat man reaching into his coat again, staring at Haruaki's group while exuding an unusual aura. Just as Haruaki jumped in fright reflexively, the man yelled "W-Whatever...!" while drawing out his hand—

"Th-Th-This is my name card——!"

He handed out his card seriously.

"What...?"

Haruaki had no choice but to take it. On the card was a perfectly ordinary company name along with a perfectly ordinary man's name. Haruaki stopped thinking while turning his gaze forward once more.

"H-Hoo... G-Great, I finally managed to hand it out... Every time I try to hand my card to someone for the first time, I instantly get very nervous...!"

The man muttered to himself while wiping sweat off his brow. At this moment, the boy ran over while carrying Guillotine in his arms.

"Dad, thank you! You really helped me to find Rasputin. You've changed my view of you completely, Dad!"

"R-Really... That's right. Okay, we must thank these people who took care of her."

The boy turned towards Haruaki's group that was staring dumbfounded and bowed as a child would.

"Uh—Thank you very much!"

"Oh... It's nothing, umm..."

After asking about the details, they discovered that the trench coat man was neither mafia nor a member of a theft organization—He was the boy's father and had gone searching everywhere for the dog on his behalf. Something like that. Then there was astounding fact that the dog's original name that was just as bizarre as "Guillotine."

At this moment, Fear bit her lip and stepped forward towards the boy as well as Guillotine, held in his embrace.

"Hey Fear. These people must be Guillotine's owner—"

"I know. That's why I wanna say something."

Fear answered Haruaki without looking back at him. She stopped in front of the boy.

"Kid, you must be the owner who lost Guillotine... No, this dog, right?"

"Y-Yes. Uh—But..."

"No need to explain. I can see that she's happy. You probably regretted abandoning her and went searching for her? I have no intention of stealing her from you... But please!"

Fear clenched her fist tight and spoke with mournful eyes:

"Please don't abandon her again. Don't throw her away like a tool just because you don't want her anymore... Abandoned things are always... very lonely. Even real tools feel lonely. Once forced to confront the truth of being unwanted, abandoned in a deserted place, facing nothing but endless time to ponder the meaning of one's existence. That is very painful."

She spoke quietly from her own experience.

The boy looked at Fear for quite a while, at a loss, but then he spoke:

"I don't quite get what you mean, but I'll never separate from Rasputin again. Also, the one who abandoned him was neither me nor my dad but my mom."

"Hmm?"

"My mom was against having a dog for the longest time. When we moved houses, it became a huge argument again... In the end, my mom went ahead and abandoned Rasputin somewhere on her own. That's so mean, right? But luckily, we found her! I'll definitely protect her from now on. No matter how many times I must argue with Mom, I'll protect Rasputin!"

"...Do you swear?"

"Yes, I swear!"

The puppy in the boy's arms barked happily and wagged her tail as though in sync with his nodding motion. Fear made a faint smile saying "Really?"

"Having a home where one belongs to is a great source of happiness. Whether for humans, dogs... or tools as well."

Then as though dealing with fragile objects, she stroked Guillotine's head, then the boy's head. Both the dog and the boy shrank their necks away in a similar manner as though tickled.

"So... Sorry for troubling you during this time..."

"Woah! No, not at all. Umm, we should be thankful instead. We were rescued only thanks to you pulling us up from the river."

Haruaki bowed back in return to the father who was bowing in apology. Upon closer examination, Haruaki noticed his cowardly expression, pitifully bald head and a complete lack of assertiveness. As a master of the house, he was really lacking in solemnity.

"I'm always submissive in front of my wife... But after seeing how sad my son was, I decided this won't do, so for the first time, I wanted to try hard and show him his father's reliable side..."

After finding out with great difficulty from the wife where the dog was abandoned, he started searching the area. Then he caught sight of Fear going home with the puppy in her arms.

"Umm, excuse me, but if you spoke to us honestly, wouldn't the problem have been resolved instantly...?"

Konoha raised her hand slightly and asked, prompting the man to shake his head hastily:

"H-How could I!? Asking me to suddenly call out to someone I meet for the first time, that's way too scary!"

"..."

"Like today, I started hesitating since 6am whether to ring your doorbell or not. Then later on, you guys happened to come out, I was thinking I should at least pass my name card along to you, but couldn't find a right opportunity... I'm so sorry. Arghhh, this is the way I am, that's why I keep getting scolded by my department boss..."

Recalling how the man reached into his trench coat and stopped, Haruaki could not help but sigh. How did this man survive in society all this time with such shyness?

"Dad, we should be getting home."

"Oh, that's true~ You're right."

"Are you confident you can convince your mother?"

Fear asked but the boy looked up at his father's face and said:

"No problem! Because Dad is standing on my side!"

"O-Of course. When the time comes to act, your dad will act after all. You saw me just now, right?"

"Yeah, you were super cool when you rescued them!"

"I pitched in everything I could muster at the time... Eh, speaking of which, the thing back then was...?"

Fear groaned and moved her gaze away from the puzzled father. Haruaki and Konoha frantically said:

"Th-That was a rake! A veritable rake!"

"That was a newest model of a portable and foldable rake! Very amazing, aha... Ahahahahaha!"

Although the man was taken aback for an instant, he smiled cordially and said "I see" and did not pursue the matter any further. Perhaps he realized that it was not a topic Haruaki's group wished to touch on.

The father and son bid a final farewell before going home, hand in hand. Walking beside them, Guillotine looked back and went "woof." Originally waving goodbye, Fear paused for a moment before waving even more forcefully than before. Standing behind her, Haruaki could not see her expression.

Soon after, the family disappeared from view.

"What a shame, Fear."

"...It's okay. Since the original owner showed up, it can't be helped."

Haruaki was thinking of comforting her but did not expect Fear to take things in stride so easily. She even went "hmp" and pouted mildly. Haruaki still felt that she was trying to act strong. Was his imagination being overactive?

"Really? I think it's quite a shame actually... I remember how you desperately advocated to keep her. Why did you want to keep her so much?"

"Muu... Because animals are so soft to the touch with big round eyes and fuzzy tails. I can't find a good reason. Also..."

"Also...?"

"Since she was abandoned without a place to belong to, I thought she'd be happy to come to our home. That's all."

Fear answered softly.

Turning towards the direction where Guillotine had vanished, she said:

"No... That house is very old, the walls are so thin and there are really noisy fellows living there, it's cramped like hell! But umm, I still feel... that it won't be an unhappy place."

During the first half of her speech, Fear was glaring sideways at Haruaki as though she had suddenly recalled something. During the second half, her gaze turned straight ahead again while she stammered.

"So, ummm... For someone who doesn't have a place to belong to, it's not a bad location, probably... That's just what I think. That's all."

Surfacing on her profile was a curl of her lips that resembled both a smile and a wry grin.

Someone without a place to belong to. Someone abandoned. What was she thinking when she spoke those words?

Haruaki could only imagine, only imagining what she thought as a tool that was once abandoned.

However, the truth of the matter at hand was that she was no longer a tool. Why that came to be—Starting as a tool for harming humans, getting cursed due to the atrocities committed, then becoming no longer a tool due to being cursed, this tragic situation—Haruaki knew very well.

Haruaki thought to himself, what was he able to do? As an ordinary human, what was he able to do?

It was obvious, right?

He must protect the place where the single wish of "lifting one's curse" could be realized, the location the girls had decided as the place where they belonged. He must protect it with happiness, stability and comfort.

"So... Let's get home first. After all, I'm completely drenched and need a change of dry clothes."

"Oh~ That's right now that you mention it. Besides, the feeling of clothes sticking to the body feels super gross—"

Fear suddenly stopped speaking. Haruaki also noticed the reason. They had not noticed earlier because their attention was focused on Guillotine, but the thin fabric of Fear's clothing was completely drenched. Drenched to the point that her clothes seemed see-through. And just as she said, her clothes were sticking to her body. For example, her white thighs, the area around her petite navel, a certain charming bulge—

"Uwah—! What's going on?"

"You didn't notice? Just now, the boy and his father also seemed to be pretending not to see."

Konoha was looking in surprise at Fear who was desperately trying to pull her clothes to the side and wring them dry. Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away and said:

"I-I didn't notice either! In other words, I didn't see anything at all!"

"HA—RU—A—KI—KUN? Saying that makes you all the more suspicious—!"

Konoha deliberately circled over before him and showed eyes of intense displeasure. Haruaki could also feel an aura of murderous intent rising behind her—

"...Fu. Fu. Fu. I almost forgot. Speaking of things in that house that are troubling... It's that the shameless brat is utterly shameless!"

"Wait, why do I get the feeling that you girls are the reason every single time?"

"Wah—! Don't look at me, dummy—I'll curse you! Damn it, I absolutely can't tolerate the shameless brat's shameless behavior! I'm going back first!"

Just as Fear wrapped her arms around her body as she spoke, turning around and about to run off—She seemed to realize that she would definitely draw people's attention along the way if she returned like this. hence, she rapidly spun around and rushed towards Haruaki, demanding "Gimme your jacket!"

"Okay okay, I'll lend you my clothing! On the other hand, are you really okay going back by yourself?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not a child, of course it's okay! I can already go out for a walk on my own. This means I'm able to return home successfully on my own!"

"Returning home successfully on your own... Really? Why do I feel that all this can be traced back to that particular walk?"

"Actually, it can't be said to be entirely Fear's fault... But whatever. It's fine if you want to walk on your own, but bringing stray dogs home is not allowed."

"I-I know, okay! I won't pick up stray dogs again. Jeez, you're always nagging so much!"

"Yes yes yes, sorry for nagging so much. Oh, you must follow the rules and enter through the front door. Here, take the key!"

Wearing Haruaki's tracksuit jacket, Fear finally stuck out her tongue mischievously then ran towards home. Haruaki could not help but exchange glances with Konoha and shrug helplessly. Then the two of them walked leisurely side by side.

In front of them was the image of Fear's back, gradually shrinking in the distance.

Drenched thoroughly, her shiny silver hair was swaying nonstop like a puppy's tail.

Several days later.

After dinner, while drinking tea in the living room, Haruaki and Konoha heard a sound—

Meow~

"..."

"..."

This was followed by a hushed voice saying "H-Hey! Be quiet...!"

Hearing these sounds coming from Fear's room, Haruaki and Konoha exchanged glances. Then the two did not say a word.

Stiff smiles hung on their faces.

Slowly, they stood up—

Then—

Nothing changed at all.

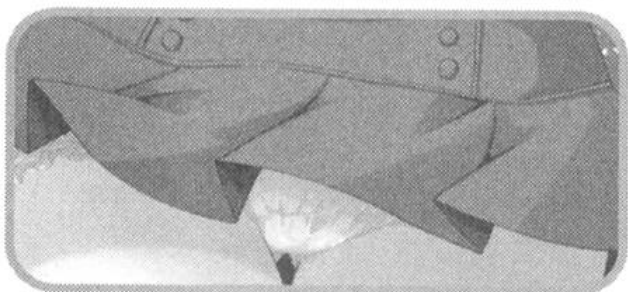
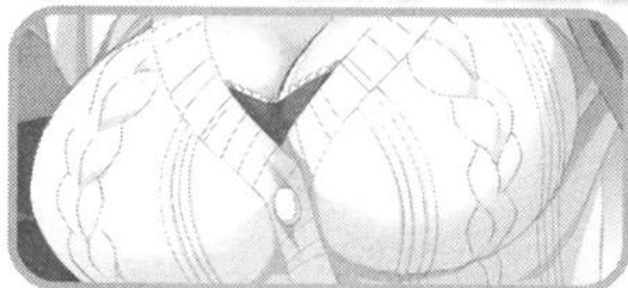
Except that this home—

Was lively yet peaceful as always.

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



日曜日は
すといきんぐ日和



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 2 - Sunday Is a Good Day for Stalking

Part 1

One night, an exceptionally somber atmosphere was hanging in the Yachi residence's living room.

Whether Haruaki, Fear or Konoha, all of them were narrowing their eyes as though facing a grave challenge.

There was only one reason, all because of the "enemy" whose imminent arrival was the day after. A difficult opponent who was absolutely impossible to escape from. A formidable foe who would bring unimaginable trouble were one to suffer defeat.

Everyone living in Japan was familiar with the name of this great and powerful enemy, namely—

Midterm exams.

"Muu— Hey~ How do you pronounce this kanji?"

Frowning while keeping her mechanical pencil clamped between her nose and lips, Fear was clearly troubled while she proudly brought her Modern Japanese textbook before Haruaki. Looking up from his English notebook, Haruaki answered:

"That's pronounced 'senren.' Are you really okay? If you can't even read that word..."

"Compared to knowing how to say things, this is on a different level of difficulty. You're being annoying. Besides, why must Japanese use three different written scripts? Don't you find that too complicated!? Although memorizing it outright can get me a few marks, there are limits, you know!?"

Fear's memory was quite good but still not too skilled in reading and writing. Japanese language class was her weak point and Haruaki could predict a failing grade with substantial certainty. But disregarding that one subject, she did have one subject where she definitely achieved high marks. Since they were having a group study session the day before the exams, Haruaki tried to ask Fear for help.

"Fear, I don't quite get the English composition here. I have trouble with the subjunctive mood."

This resulted in Fear puffing her chest out proudly:

"Hmph hmph~ Shameless brat. You finally want to beg me... Very well, let me teach you! That one is—Umuu, if I had money I could have bought a—!"

"Your pronunciation is too good. I can't make out a single word!"

At this moment, the table shook slightly. In other words, as Konoha gazed directly towards Haruaki's hand, her upper body had leaned against the table, displaying enough mass and volume to shake the table. The bulging suppleness yielded in shape. Her braids tickled the back of Haruaki's hand. The side of her face was filled with kindness and tender affection.

"Please ask me, Haruaki-kun. Uh—Is it here? This says... If I had had..."

Konoha carefully instructed Haruaki on the English words one by one. However, Fear apparently could not accept her task being stolen by someone else, hence she pouted angrily and said:

"Hmph, what's with your pronunciation!? I'm dying of laughter there! You Cow Tits, which country do you really plan on using this ludicrous language in?"

"Hmph, we're not tested on pronunciation in the first place so what does it matter? Besides, foreign speech is something that only needs to be used during exams! By the way, people living in this country should place greater importance in Japanese culture rather than foreign languages. For example, memorizing literature of the following type would be only natural! The nightingale is renowned as a bird with wondrous singing, its voice first and foremost, its appearance so elegant and adorable, but it is said that the bird no longer sang once brought into the palace—"

"Another attack of the mysterious incantations? Ooh, it makes my head hurt!"

"Uh—You two, we have less than ten hours until the exam."

"... "..."

The two girls glared at each other while returning to their seats and burying themselves in their textbooks and notes once again. Fear knew her performance in Japanese was uncertain. On the other hand, despite her

excellent grades overall, Konoha's serious personality deterred her from taking things lightly. Currently, their top priority was staying focused to study.

Shortly after, Fear sighed as she stared at the textbook, murmuring as though talking to herself:

"Good grief, this is such a pain. I never expected school to be so much harder than I imagined. Is everyone suffering just like me...? However, I get the feeling that Kirika doesn't have such a tough time in her studies."

Still immersed in his notes, Haruaki answered without looking up:

"Right, I guess Class Rep doesn't need to study desperately at the last minute like us? She did mention that she stopped going to cram school recently. But given her prudent and rigorous personality, I'm sure she's been studying dutifully."

"Muu, I'm so jealous. Perhaps it'd be nice to have her join our study gathering for the next round of exams... Rather, speaking of jealous, I should be jealous of Sovereignty instead. Because that girl doesn't need to take exams at all!"

"Based on what you said, wouldn't you need to envy everyone who is not a student?"

Konoha's remark prompted a wry expression from Haruaki as he recalled one of Fear and Konoha's kindred, the maid who held the incomprehensible title of superintendent's secretary's assistant-in-training. That said, she was not always a girl at all times.

At this moment, Fear suddenly cocked her head and said:

"Hmm? Speaking of Sovereignty... What about that girl Shiraho? How does she study?"

The young beauty, Sakuramairi Shiraho, was Sovereignty's lover. Whenever Haruaki encountered her, she either treated him as nonexistent or gave him a vicious scolding accompanied by a cold smile of absolute zero. They had never spoken like normal classmates.

Hence, for Haruaki's group, Fear had asked a most natural question.

Exchanging glances with Konoha, Haruaki cocked his head like Fear and said:

"...Who knows."

Part 2

After days of group studying, they finally overcame the challenge of exams, but their hardship was not yet over. Lying in wait for them was the onslaught of wave after wave of graded exam papers.

Then after school once the last exam paper was returned, Haruaki's group walked to the superintendent's office. This was because Fear had proposed with a face filled with exhaustion: "If I don't drink some tea to heal the damage, I won't be able to walk home~"

Due to their personal ties to the superintendent, going to his office for fun was nothing unusual. Naturally, they would still control the time and frequency with care so as not to create trouble for others.

Haruaki arrived at the superintendent's office together with Fear, who was walking dejectedly, as well as Konoha, who had gained a spring in her steps now that she was liberated from the exams. At this moment, the door happened to open from inside. Out walked an ordinary male student. Judging from his indoor shoes, he was a third year student. He departed after bowing politely and glancing at them. How rare to find a student visiting the superintendent's office—thought Haruaki. That said, he was not really in a position to judge others on that point.

In any case, Haruaki's group entered the room as though substituting for the boy.

"Eh... All of you have come, what's the matter?"

"Oh, it's you guys! It's been a while! How did the exams go?"

Inside the superintendent's office was the cool beauty of a secretary—Zenon—accompanied by Sovereignty in her maid outfit as usual. Fear lightly raised a hand and said:

"Nothing much... I failed my Modern and Ancient Japanese. I'm even required to take supplementary lessons tomorrow on Sunday... Sigh—So I wanted to see if there are any tasty snacks and tea over here to help re-energize me."

"Hey Fear! Don't be so direct and tactless! On the other hand, Zenon-san, if you're busy, we'll take our leave... But it's been quite a while since we

last chatted with Sovereignty~ If it doesn't bother you, could we stay a while?"

In response to Haruaki, Zenon smiled and said:

"Yes, of course it's not a problem. You don't need to be so polite. After all, the superintendent is not around and the visitor just left... Sovereignty, could you please brew and bring some tea over?"

"Understood—!"

"...Please calm down in earnest."

As the maid disappeared noisily into the room next door, who knew if she was actually listening. Zenon sighed then asked Haruaki's group to take a seat at the sofa. Everyone sat down and Konoha said:

"By the way, how rare for a student to visit. This is probably the first time I saw one."

"Oh... You mean the boy from just now? He has been coming quite often lately. In principle, we welcome students to the superintendent's office so long as they have any requests or suggestions for the school—But all he has provided are relatively inconsequential opinions such as suggesting changes in the types of flowers planted in the flowerbeds. However, since these kinds of suggestions can be handled simply by responding 'We will consider it,' they could be considered rather easy and effortless."

"I see~ So this kind of neurotic person actually existed in the school..."

Konoha nodded with a sympathetic gaze. Then as everyone started to chat for a while, Sovereignty emerged from the room next door, carrying a tray unsteadily.

Although Haruaki's group cast gentle gazes towards her, they slightly tensed their backs... Just in case she might fall down, sending the tray flying. Naturally, this possibility had already become far less likely through her continued efforts. Currently, the probability was roughly a tossup.

As for today, Fortune seemed to smiling upon them. Despite the dangerous looking process, the airheaded maid finally delivered the tea safely to the table, allowing Haruaki and the rest to breathe a sigh of relief.

Next, everyone began to drink tea together. A while later, someone suddenly knocked. Zenon replied "Please enter."

"Oh, Shiraho!"

Originally chatting cheerfully with Fear, Sovereignty stood up with all smiles.

Standing at the doorway was a striking young beauty. The smile on her face disappeared as soon as she spotted Haruaki's group. Frowning with displeasure, she said:

"Thinking you were about to get off work, I came to pick you up... What are these people doing here?"

"Ehehe, they're having tea. Shiraho, why don't you come in and sit down for a while? Come on in. I'll brew you some tea immediately."

Shiraho scowled for quite a while then sighed as though she gave up on something. Entering, she took a seat on the sofa—Naturally, she picked the furthest spot away from Haruaki's group and sat down on the very edge.

Just as Sovereignty promised, she immediately returned from the room next door. This time, the tossup turned out favorably as well, what a miracle.

"Here's your tea."

"Thank you... Phew."

"Shiraho, are you tired?"

Nodding, Shiraho answered "yes" then spoke without acknowledging the existence of Haruaki and the rest:

"Sovereignty... About tomorrow, you mentioned that you wanted to go shopping?"

"Y-Yes! I've got something I want to buy!"

"...About that."

Shiraho sighed and took a sip of the freshly brewed tea. Then as though resolving herself—

"Sorry, I can't accompany you now."

"W-Why?"

Shiraho slowly turned her gaze away and whispered softly:

"...lessons, so..."

"Sorry, I couldn't hear you. Could you repeat that?"

"Basically, it's that..."

After a few seconds, Shiraho murmured something unknown—Then with great embarrassment, she finally uttered a simple term.

"...supplementary lessons."

"Oh... I-I see."

Sovereignty shrugged and seemed to be at a loss on how to react. Next to her, Fear put down her teacup and suddenly stood up. Supporting herself with both hands on the table, she leaned forward and said:

"Hoho, I get it now! Shiraho, you need to take supplementary lessons as well! I see, I see!"

"Hey... It's none of your business! Why are you getting so happy about it!?"

"That's not what I'm happy about. How should I put this? Doesn't it feel like we're comrades!? Oh right, which subject did you fail? These guys here are so mean. They didn't fail anything. As for Taizou and Kana, they have to take supplementary lessons for English and mathematics, so there's no overlap with me. I was just worrying if there'd be anyone I knew in the same subject as my supplementary lessons. So, did you fail Modern Japanese? Or Ancient? Hurry now and tell me!"

Shiraho bit her lip and remained silent. Her clenched fists resting on her thighs, she blushed slightly as she glared at Fear. Then—

"...Okay."

"Hmm? I didn't catch that."

Just as Fear leaned further forward, Shiraho looked up forcefully and yelled in self-abandonment:

"All of them, okay! Excuse me! Anyone got a problem with that!?"



Only the sound of people sipping tea could be heard in the room. Shiraho was originally exuding a murderous aura that threatened to kill anyone who dared to speak, regardless who they were. Finally, she calmed down.

"...So that's the situation. Hence, I'm very sorry about tomorrow... How about we go together the next holiday?"

"Y-Yeah—Though I was hoping to buy it as soon as possible..."

Although Sovereignty murmured a few words, she quickly came to understand the difficulties Shiraho faced. Hence, she smiled innocently as she gazed at Shiraho's face from the side:

"However, this can't be helped. Shiraho, your supplementary lessons are more important... Ehehe, it's really okay."

"Hmm..."

While watching Sovereignty's brave expression, Shiraho halted in her original movements. She was not glaring at Sovereignty. Even a bystander like Haruaki could tell that Shiraho was most likely suppressing the urge to embrace her tightly.

"Although I've no idea what you want to buy... It's something that you wish to purchase tomorrow if possible, right?"

"Eh? Yeah, that's right."

"Is it something you can buy on your own?"

"I think it's quite easy to buy... But I'd like to shop for other stuff as well on the way. Also, going shopping by myself is no fun at all. However, I don't really mind. I'll just wait for you at home tomorrow until you return."

"But I do mind. Seeing you smiling in that way, arghh... I can't stand it—I admit defeat to you!"

She put down her empty teacup on the tray with a clatter. Next, Shiraho glared viciously at Haruaki who had been observing their conversation as a mere bystander. Pulling Haruaki's arm forcefully, she—

"Come over here, human!"

"Woah? W-What are you doing!?"

Haruaki was pulled directly to a corner of the room by Shiraho. With their backs to everyone else, they were standing shoulder to shoulder. Shiraho's beautiful and elegant face immediately drew up close to him, startling Haruaki.

"...As much as I am extremely reluctant, it can't be helped. You shall serve as her escort!"

"Eh...? What you mean is that I'll accompany Sovereignty to go shopping tomorrow?"

"Duh, can there be any other interpretation? I can't accompany her to go shopping tomorrow but I don't want her hard-earned holiday to go to waste. Since I cannot let her go shopping alone without worrying, I have no choice but to find someone else to accompany her. Any questions?"

"I was planning on doing a large pile of accumulated laundry tomorrow..."

"Oh really? I'm most grateful that you would agree to my request so readily."

"Uh, isn't there something strange with this exchange of dialogue?"

"What are you talking about? In any case, please take careful note of three rules, each of which I've already prepared a most wonderful punishment, so please prepare yourself. First of all, you must obey that child's orders absolutely. Should you dare oppose her will, I shall kill you. Secondly, do not lay your hands on that child, not even a finger. Should you dare touch her, you shall lose your life. Third of all, you are forbidden from ogling that child with your perverted gaze. Should you dare ogle her, I shall end your life."

"Aren't all these punishments the same..."

"Because each rule concerns a crime of the highest offense, this sort of punishment is only natural."

Putting those unreasonable death sentences aside, Haruaki could see that his accompanying Sovereignty was already decided for him. Oh~ Farewell, my leisurely laundry time.

"All you need to do is follow her obediently like a knight. I do have concerns... Although it's possible that my worries may be excessive."

Shiraho spoke while her eyes suggested that she was recalling something. However, Haruaki could not quite understand her words.

"Sigh... Since you already asked, it's not like I have a choice, right? On the other hand, are you really okay with it?"

Shiraho smiled tenderly.

"Do you really consider yourself attractive enough to cause any cracks to come between us? No matter how high your self-esteem, do know your place, human... Also..."

No longer whispering in secrecy, Shiraho looked back, turning her head of beautiful black hair towards Haruaki. Looking completely proud, she finally murmured:

"All I wish is for that child to remain ever smiling for eternity. Nothing more than that."

Part 3

The next day, it was Sunday morning.

Fear left the house only minutes after Haruaki had headed off for the meeting place. Naturally, she was dressed in her school uniform and even carried her schoolbag that contained stationery to use in her supplementary lessons.

Outside the house, just as she took a step towards the right, she stopped then crossed her arms before her chest to ponder "Hmm"—her entire brow was furrowed—Finally, she nodded as though she had committed to some sort of decision.

Just as she glared furiously and turned right to a large and angry step—

"School is in the opposite direction, Fear-san."

"Ugh!"

Leaving the house last, Konoha was staring coldly at Fear. Startled and panicking, Fear met gazes with her.

"What about you? Didn't you say you had to work at the bookshop today? Even if you sprinted now, you're not gonna make it, right?"

"Ugh!"

Confronted with Fear's cold stare in return, it was Konoha's turn to display slight panic. After staring at each other for a while—

"...By the way, I seem to have caught a cold."

"...What a coincidence, me too. So I had to cancel my part-time job at short notice."

"I really can't get to school but lying down at home isn't making me better. That's why I'm going in this direction. How should I say this? Oh right, I think the power of Feng Shui will heal me."

"What a coincidence, me too."

"So, it can't be helped..."

"That's right, this cannot be avoided at all..."

The two girls nodded slowly. What their exchanged gazes confirmed was their mutual relationship as accomplices. Indeed, just for today. As much as they rubbed each other the wrong way, they both shared a goal necessitating mutual assistance.

Hence, after the two of them reached out simultaneously and shook hands to seal a definite agreement of secrecy—

They ran towards downtown where the excessively nice guy and the maid had agreed to meet, instead of the school or the shopping street where the bookshop was located.

Leaning against the big clock in front of the train station, Haruaki did not wait long before Sovereignty walked over from the station.

"Good morning—! Did you wait long?"

"N-No, not at all."

Haruaki was stammering a bit due to the refreshing sight of Sovereignty in casual clothing. Her miniskirt and striking color coordination suited her lively personality quite well. Perhaps to accommodate the autumn weather that was still quite warm, the collar and neckline of her clothing was wide open, causing Haruaki to feel a bit embarrassed, unsure where to direct his gaze.

"That's good... Eheheh. But I'm really sorry about today! Forcing you to accompany me on a Sunday."

Sovereignty leaned forward slightly as though inviting him to look towards her. This movement caused the sight of her chest to become even more dangerous. Haruaki had no choice but to divert his gaze and scratch his head while saying:

"I-It's okay, really~ After all, cleaning and laundry can be done any time. Besides, going shopping once in a while is not bad at all."

"That's true too. I was quite surprised in the beginning too, but since it's Shiraho's arrangement for my sake after all, I must enjoy myself thoroughly! This is also my first time going out to have fun with someone apart from Shiraho!"

Although calling it "Shiraho's arrangement" was a bit strange... Whatever, since they were already here, there was nothing more to complain about.

"Say, I don't really know the shops very well. If you want to have fun, I think that Fear or Konoha would do a better job—putting aside the fact that Fear needs to attend supplementary lessons just like Shiraho, I never expected that Konoha would need to work part-time today as well."

"Hmm... Somehow I feel a bit sorry for the two of them."

"However, it can't be helped. If there's a chance next time, you three should pick a date to go out and have fun together. That would make up for today's regrets, right?"

Haruaki proposed his little idea but Sovereignty simply smiled back in a polite and ambiguous manner, murmuring:

"Ahaha... I don't think that will really make up for much..."

"Anyway, let's put that aside for now. Standing here talking won't achieve anything, so we'd better get going. What are you thinking of buying?"

"Ufufu, that's a secret. I've decided to save my main goal for last, so let's just walk around first! This is a rare opportunity!"

"Following obediently like a knight huh... Is that it? I understand, Your Highness the princess."

Then the two of them walked side by side, towards the bustling streets.

"Those two... seem quite friendly... with each other... F-Fufu, fufufufufufu!"

"Don't you find their shoulders too close together~? Ufufufufu!"

Hiding in the bushes to spy on Haruaki and Sovereignty, Fear and Konoha displayed twitching smiles on their face. Whenever they saw their quarry move, they would move at high speed in a half crouching manner like ninjas or soldiers then take cover again behind another object. They completely ignored the dubious looks that bystanders were giving them.

"Oh... Hold on, Fear-san."

"What now? We're gonna lose them if we don't hurry... Hmm?"

Konoha pulled Fear's sleeve. Wonder what was the matter, Fear followed her gaze. Halfway along their line of sight towards Haruaki and Sovereignty, there was an extremely suspicious figure. Hiding behind a vending machine, a girl was furtively peeking ahead. The bizarreness of the giant pair of shades on her face only served to draw even more unwanted attention.

Fear and Konoha exchanged a glance then quietly approached the girl's back—

"Hey!"

"Kyah!? It's you... two, why...!?"

It turned out to be Shiraho, who was so startled that her shoulder bumped into the vending machine.

"What are you doing?"

"W-What do you mean, what am I doing...?"

"Please be honest. Depending on the situation, perhaps we will assist you."

Fear and Konoha kept staring straight at her. Soon enough, Shiraho turned her face to the side.

"Well... Before Sovereignty left the house, I was originally intending to go attend supplementary lessons at school dutifully. But once she departed, I suddenly became very worried—By the time I regained my senses, I was already here—Hey wait! Aren't you supposed to be taking supplementary lessons too? Why are you here!?"

Silently, Fear extended her hand as though seeking for allies. Gazing into Shiraho's eyes, she nodded. Konoha also nodded.

After several seconds, Shiraho nodded as well.

Then slowly, she reached out and shook Fear's hand. Konoha also extended her hand and the three girls stacked their hands together, palms facing downward.

"If I'm spotted, Haruaki will be angry to find out I skipped my supplementary lessons. If you're spotted, Sovereignty will get mad for the same reason. As for Cow Tits, Haruaki will be angry to find out she skipped out on work. Therefore, our fates are as one."

"In any case, we must operate in secret—Although it's a mission fraught with challenges, so long as the three of us cooperate wholeheartedly, there is nothing we cannot accomplish."

"...How truly incredible. Only now do I find the two of you honest and reliable."

As soon as they withdrew their hands from the pile, the trio instantly resumed their surveillance stance, pressed against the vending machine. Haruaki and Sovereignty were chatting amiably while walking ahead casually.

"Look at the shameless brat's idiotic expression. I strongly predict that he'll do something shameless...!"

"Also, Sovereignty-san is too unguarded. Rather, she is the very embodiment of cluelessness. I would not be surprised if anything were to happen eventually."

"But simply observing secretly would be quite meaningless. What should we do?"

"Isn't it obvious? As soon as any shameless behavior is about to happen, we must take all necessary precautions to prevent it. Of course, we must do it without them noticing."

"Is that achievable?"

"Rather than predict, it's more a matter of imagination... Muu, they've entered the park!"

Luckily, there were many trees in the large park. While circling behind trees to hide, they moved to positions where they could observe Haruaki and Sovereignty. Since it was Sunday, there were all sorts of people at the park, such as family members having fun in harmony, kids playing soccer happily, old people sunbathing, as well as a few vendors...

"Oh no! I-I think something dangerous is about to happen!"

"Ah! Look over there, Sovereignty-san seems to be pointing somewhere!"

Fear was making the most of her imagination while following Konoha's directions to shift her gaze. Sovereignty was pointing at an ice-cream vendor. At this moment, a thought flashed through her mind with great alarm.

"Woah... I can foresee it, I can foresee it! After buying ice-cream, Sovereignty will end up in an embarrassing state as usual with melted ice-cream... Dripped on her chest!"

"Frantically trying to wipe it clean, further indecent developments will occur...!"

"No way, that must be prevented at all costs!"

"Of course. Great, I've thought of a plan to stop it! Follow me!"

The plan was very simple.

Basically, they were going to infiltrate the ice-cream stand.

...And threaten the owner to refuse the sale.

"...Strange...? Why do I... suddenly... get the feeling that we're doing something way out of line...?"

Crouching in the stand, Konoha murmured as she massaged her temples. Shiraho also murmured: "...What a coincidence, I get the same feeling too." Just like the other two girls, Fear was also crouching beneath the counter, but—

"Listen to me carefully. When those two come, just say 'the ice-cream's sold out.' If you dare call for help... You should know the consequences, right?"

"Y-Yes. I know...!"

Fear kept poking the male owner in the butt with her massive drill. Although they had subdued the shopkeeper with speed rivaling a SWAT team's, meaning that their faces should not have been spotted—How should one put this...? Was this morally acceptable?

"Oh dear, let's not be too concerned for now. Just let it go first. Everything is trivial in the face of a crisis. Although I feel a bit sorry for Sovereignty-san... I hope she can endure this hardship and go without ice-cream for today."

"O-Of course. Compared to having that child's skin exposed to the human's perverted ogling, the difference in importance is as disparate as heaven and earth. It's a severe crime punishable by death."

While listening to Shiraho, Konoha slowly peered out from the counter top to check out the situation outside.

"Let's fill our stomachs first! Hurry now—!"

Sovereignty jogged leisurely while Haruaki chased after her with a wry smile.

Just as the trio predicted, they were slowly approaching the ice-cream stand—

Then they walked past it.

"Found it found it! That's the shawarma I've always wanted to try out!"

Shawarma was a Mediterranean style of cooking that involved roasting meat on a rotating spit and carving slices off to serve and eat.

How did this option suddenly appear?

Greatly surprised, Konoha slowly looked back to find Shiraho expressionless while Fear was staring in dumbfounded amazement. Nevertheless, the trio simultaneously tensed their expressions and understood what they needed to do next.

Then with a serious expression, Konoha nodded silently to convey her thoughts to the other two—

"Uh—Excuse me... May I move now...? W-Well, it's also fine if you still want me to stay still. Please forgive me, spare my life—!"

Ignoring the shopkeeper's pitiful pleas, the trio prepared to flee.

"Eh—So it turns out the meat is eaten by wrapping it with bread? Looks very tasty."

"Oh, let's go over to the benches over there to sit down and eat—"

There were many crowds because it was Sunday. Almost all the proper seats were taken but luckily there was still an empty bench for Haruaki and Sovereignty to sit. As Sovereignty happily giggled "ehehe" without particular meaning, Haruaki exchanged a shy smile with her and began to take a large bite out of the newly bought shawarma.

"Mmm mmm.... Ah, this is delicious—!"

"Oh~ This is not bad. The saltiness is just right."

The pure taste of meat gradually expanded inside the mouth with just a single bite. This was probably a case of delicious food being delicious without requiring particular thought or evaluation... Simple it may be, it was an important truth. Haruaki decided to keep this truth close to heart and avoid getting conceited just because he was well-versed in a few cooking techniques.

"By the way, the two of you live alone in that house, right? How do you take care of meals?"

"Hmm—Well, we buy ready-made dishes half the time while we cook together for the remainder. Since neither of us are familiar with cooking, we pretty much feel our way through while looking at cookbooks. But it's really fun cooking together! Putting taste aside!"

"R-Really...? But the most important thing is you're happy, I guess. Anyway, please be careful with the flame. After all, you're, uh—How should I put it? Quite..."

"Hmm—After all, I know I'm basically a klutz. Take Shiraho for example, she keeps warning 'dangerous' to me and doesn't allow me to touch the knives or the stove."

Sovereignty pouted in a joking manner but immediately resumed her smile.

"Oh right! Haruaki-kun, you're quite good at cooking, right? Maybe next time you could teach us!"

"Sure, I don't mind. But you aside, I don't really think she'll listen to me obediently..."

Dice it? Y-You're very annoying! How about I start practicing with your fingers, human! —Haruaki imagined such scenes would become commonplace while reminding himself to be prepared.

Just as Haruaki smiled wryly in silence and was about to take another bite from the shawarma he was holding—

A slight impact shook his right hand, causing the shawarma to fly out of his grasp.

"Eh?"

"Phew~ I'm full now... Eh, Haruaki-kun!?"

Entering her view was the sight of scattering meat and shawarma bread flying, as well as—

A small stone, flying in the air after bouncing off the target it had struck.

Haruaki did not know what had happened. The next thing he saw was Sovereignty reacting with superhuman speed.

Yelling "Heya!", Sovereignty caught the shawarma bread with her right hand that was free now that she had finished eating her own portion. Things did not end there. She also reached out with her left and caught the scattering pieces of meat with her fingertips—

"Wow—! I succeeded, I caught everything safely! I think my reflexes are really amazing!"

"Woah! You don't really need to catch the meat with your bare hands so desperately!"

"But food shouldn't be wasted~ My body acted on its own."

"That's a noble sentiment. But come on, who was that? Which child was throwing stones for fun? It's dangerous."

Looking at where the stone had come flying, Haruaki could not find anyone resembling a suspect. Perhaps he fled already... Were the parents around, Haruaki really wished they would scold the child properly.

"Luckily, it didn't hit you. Anyway, here you go."

Sovereignty handed the bread she had caught back to Haruaki, who accepted it with gratitude. However—

"Also, this meat... It'll still be a mess even if I try to put it back into the bread. So here, open up and say ah—"

"...!?"

Smiling radiantly, Sovereignty extended her hand in front of Haruaki. Impossible... Sovereignty, do you mean to perform that legendary act? That super embarrassing act.

"Uh—I don't really mind if you put the meat back in..."

"Eh—? You don't think that'll be gross? It's okay, I like doing this. I feed Shiraho like this all the time."

Just as Haruaki was about to object and say "the problem is that I'm not Shiraho," he saw her suddenly frowning sadly.

"...No? You find my fingers squeezing the meat too dirty? In that case, forget it..."

"N-No, that's not what I mean at all."

Now that she said that, it became harder to refuse?

Haruaki's gaze drifted for quite a while but it seemed like he could not escape from this. Surrendering in self-abandonment, thinking "Who cares!" He said:

"Th-Then carry on, I guess. Feed me quickly."

"I may? Okay, say ah—"

Sovereignty smiled happily and very readily performed a service that was, in a certain sense, quite fitting for her identity as a maid. Her gentle fingers reached slightly into Haruaki's mouth.

To be honest, the warmth of her fingertips felt far more substantial than the meat that was about to cool off.

"I-I won't forgive him...!"

Snapping branches in the bush where they were concealed, Shiraho groaned with murder written on her face. Fear concurred with her completely.

"Damn shameless brat, going this far right off the bat... Fufufufu!"

"Feeding Haruaki-kun... I can't believe she fed Haruaki-kun! Hmph, I'm so jealous!"

Murmuring angrily for a reason that differed from the other two, Konoha suddenly recovered her sanity and said:

"By the way, Fear-san, you're not the one who threw the stone?"

"No, it wasn't me... But if he keeps doing shameless things, I'll throw one eventually! Although I've no idea which kid is the culprit, it saved me a lot of trouble!"

"..."

At this moment, Shiraho narrowed her eyes with a strangely serious expression, staring straight at where the stone had flown. But as soon as she noticed Fear's gaze, she resumed her previous expression as though nothing had happened. Glancing at Haruaki and Sovereignty, she said:

"They look like they're about to leave the park."

"Okay, let's give chase. Next time, we must do everything possible to prevent shamelessness from happening!"

Just as the girls were about to continue following—Konoha spoke up seriously:

"Please hold on! Before that, something needs to be done!"

"W-What is it?"

With speed like a hunting hound assaulting its prey, Konoha jumped out of the bushes and dashed in the direction opposite to where Haruaki and Sovereignty were heading. Her murderous intent could even be felt. Wondering if an enemy had shown up, Fear frantically stood up and reached for the toy cube kept in her pocket.

At this moment, Konoha's eyes flashed sharply from behind her glasses as she faced off with the target—

"I'll have one, no, two of those! If possible, please put in extra meat!"

Konoha's instincts as a meat lover were completely displayed in front of the shawarma stand without pretense.

Part 4

Haruaki and Sovereignty proceeded to the large department store in front of the station. The two of them were checking out a clothing store inside. As usual, Fear and company monitored them while hiding on the side. Haruaki and Sovereignty were barely within the trio's earshot.

"Let's see... Wow, that's so expensive! Girls' clothes are really quite expensive~ You can actually stomach these prices?"

"Hmm—Today I'm just going to try them out. But the next time my salary is paid out, perhaps I really might!"

"Oh right, you are receiving a salary after all... Oh, lemme go to the washroom. You'll still be in this section, right?"

"Yeah, I'll probably be trying on clothes when you return. Just call to me when you're back—"

Hence, Haruaki left the clothing section. Fear and her companions brought their heads together to strategize.

"Indeed, this place seems likely for shameless acts to happen again."

"...I remember you saying the same thing back at the ice-cream stand."

"Shut up, Meat Girl! Why don't you just monopolize all the meat from that vendor and be happy by yourself!? To think you'd casually fill your own stomach without concern for others. Don't you understand the situation at all?"

"Ooh... B-But it couldn't be helped. Because it really looked too delicious..."

Konoha stammered in embarrassment. On the other hand, Shiraho shrugged helplessly and sighed, saying:

"Let's stop arguing about that for now. So, what do you expect to happen? That said~ I can pretty much guess... Thrice a week, that child falls over because she did not put her skirt on properly."

"That's really useful information. It really raises the chances of an incident... Trying on clothes takes place over there with the curtains, right? That's too dangerous. She might go something like 'I can't fasten this~' and pull Haruaki inside, or, if like Shiraho described, she could accidentally fall

over while she's changing and end up rushing outside in her underwear. If Haruaki were present..."

"That would be the worst. Even a death sentence would hardly pacify my wrath. He must suffer torture and punishment that puts an end to the cycle of reincarnation...!"

"Th-Then what should we do now?"

Fear once again examined the interior of the store. Sovereignty was standing at a display rack by the wall, comparing clothing. The fitting area had three stalls and all the curtains were open. In other words, they were all vacant. Fear began to giggle.

"I feel sorry for Sovereignty but... We have no choice but to make her give up trying on those clothes."

There were three stalls in the fitting area and they had three members in the group.

The numbers were just right, were they not?

"Eh, they're all occupied?"

Standing before the stalls, Sovereignty tilted her head in puzzlement while recalling that they had all been empty just moments ago. How strange~

"Hmm... Then I'll go over to have another look for more clothes? Yes yes, I've wanted to find a unisex hat for quite some time already—"

Then she quickly turned her back to the fitting area and returned to the interior of the store while humming happily.

Of course, she did not mind whoever was inside the stalls.

After going to the washroom, Haruaki returned to the store. Looking inside, he could not find Sovereignty. She probably went to try on clothing?

The three stalls in the fitting area were all occupied... Although it was quite embarrassing, Haruaki saw no other course of action apart from calling out. He started with the one on the left.

"Sovereignty?"

"C-Cough cough... You've got the wrong one, try another... No wait, please try another one."

Perhaps due to a cold, the answering voice was very hoarse. Despite how bizarre and out of place the voice sounded, Haruaki decided to forget about it and try the next one. This time, he stood in front of the middle stall.

"Excuse me, anyone there?"

"U-Umm—Ohoho, it's occupied. S-Sorry..."

A fake voice that was obviously put on deliberately. Still scratching his head at the sense of dissonance, Haruaki remained puzzled, but since he had confirmed that Sovereignty was not inside, he finally turned to look at the stall on the right. Since she was not in the previous two, she must be in this one.

Then just as he was about to call out lightly to the curtain—Something completely unexpected happened.

"Uwaaah?"

Someone pushed him hard from behind.

Due to the suddenness, Haruaki could not help but topple forward—falling towards the curtain of the stall.

(D-Dear heavens—!)

Perhaps his forced attempt at stabilizing himself was not quite right, Haruaki ended up pulling the curtain off from its rail. Along with the detached curtain, Haruaki fell towards the inside of the stall as though he were trying to push down the occupant. The end result was completely different from his expectations. Sovereignty was not inside.

"Kyah!?"

"Wawa... S-Sorry, I'm really sorry!"

Haruaki's face turned white as a ghost. Although the scream just now sounded familiar, now was not the time to be paying attention to that. Furthermore, due to being covered by the curtain, he could not see the other person's face—But that was not important either.

"I'm really sorry, I didn't do it on purpose!"

"Y-You're such a pervert! Pervert! Pervert! Pervert!"

"I'm going to back off immediately... Gwah! P-Please don't get violent—!"

Haruaki frantically tried to get up but the person beneath the curtain kept struggling, making it even harder for him to free himself. Finally with much difficulty, he managed to make his upper body upright, but in the next instant—

"Go—and die!"

"Gwah!?"

A completely merciless slap came flying from under the curtain, striking Haruaki directly on the cheek.

Due to the excessive force of the impact, Haruaki flew straight out of the fitting area stall just as he was trying to stand up. Not far away, a mannequin happened to block his path—

"Woah, oh no..."

Due to having lost balance, the mannequin ended up falling unsteadily. Worse yet, there was a customer crouching before a display rack with her back towards the situation. Just as she finished comparing clothes and was about to stand up—

"Yes, this is the one! Okay~ Lemme go try it on... Yawawa—!"

The mannequin fell on her from behind and pinned her to the floor. Naturally, that person turned out to be Sovereignty.

"Ehhhh? W-Who is it? Is this a sudden act of courtship? Umm, I'm very happy about your feelings but I'm already taken. So umm... Sorry—! Help—!"

Pinned down and struggling by waving her arms and legs, Sovereignty did not notice it was a mannequin. Perhaps embarrassed by the situation, she kept her eyes shut tightly. Due to her desperate struggle, her skirt was curled up to her thigh. When she accidentally touched the mannequin's hand with her body, she even moaned seductively, saying "Mmm! Don't... Let go now..."

(Woah... This makes it very difficult to rescue her!)

Watching this scene blankly at a loss, Haruaki suddenly noticed that all the fitting room stalls had emptied behind him. Putting aside the girl who had just slapped him, even the other two were gone.

"I was originally planning to apologize properly... By the way, who pushed me?"

Although Haruaki did not think that he was deliberately pushed towards the stall, the person who collided into him should have said sorry. How rude.

After a big sigh, Haruaki began to head over to rescue Sovereignty. By this point, there was probably no need to regret missing the chance to apologize to the girl in the fitting area.

This was because what followed was that he had to apologize profusely to the people in the store, so many times that he became sick and tired of it.

"Tsk, looks like I underestimated Haruaki's skills in shamelessness...! Who would have thought that even though Sovereignty clearly wasn't inside, he'd still intrude!"

"One false move and it would have ended up as a criminal act! I must punish him properly once we get back home...!"

"I'm the biggest victim here. As soon as I imagine what if I were actually changing back then, the terror chills me to the very bone...!"

Taking advantage of the turmoil to escape the store, Fear's trio regrouped, wiping sweat off their brows as they returned to their task of surveillance.

Haruaki and Sovereignty were desperately apologizing to the sales staff and finally managed to obtain their forgiveness. Miraculously, the only harm done was the detached curtain and the toppled mannequin. Had any merchandise been damaged, the store probably would not have let them off so leniently. As much as this mess was blown far bigger than imagined... Haruaki did not think that he was to blame, probably.

Walking out of the store, Haruaki and Sovereignty scratched their heads as they continued on their way.

"...How should I say this? It feels like this commotion got blown way out of proportion. Maybe we haven't kept our cool enough thus far—Should we first observe for a while? Let's try hard to resist our urge to prevent indecent events."

"Yes... Well, resisting a little should be okay. Believing in others is important too. Sovereignty can't possibly run into indecent mishaps one after another without end, right?"

"Normally speaking, believing in others should come first, right...? Oh well, whatever."

Hence, the three girls decided to change their approach and observe before intervening. Then they restarted their tailing operation.

Still oblivious to Fear and the others, Haruaki and Sovereignty were casually browsing through the department store. At the home appliance corner, Haruaki looked at the latest washing machine model while going "Hmm... Wouldn't life be a lot easier with these types of functions~ I'd really love that." This comment, atypical of high school boys, caused Sovereignty to giggle spontaneously. Other than that, they also visited the CD shop to check out prices without buying anything and tried on matching moustaches at a party goods outlet.

The most problematic person, Sovereignty, did not get into any further mishaps, causing the trio to spend their time simply watching the two of them shopping. Logically speaking, this should be a satisfactory result but for some reason, there was an inexplicable sense of sadness, as though isolated in a different world.

"What the heck... Where there's a will, there's really a way..."

As though trying to chew apart the sense of discomfort on the spot, Fear murmured. However, the situation deteriorated in a nosedive at this moment.

Someone was picking a fight with Haruaki and Sovereignty.

"Yo! It's you! You're the bastard who's disrespectin' our gang, ain'tcha? How dare you!?"

"Huh?"

The sudden voice caused Haruaki to look back. Standing before his eyes were a couple of men who looked like gangsters. The intimidating sight caused Haruaki to back away slightly and reply:

"U-Umm—Excuse me, perhaps you've mistaken me for someone else...?"

"Stop playin' dumb, foo'! ...As if anyone's mistaken! Didn't you just act all cocky and shit, tryin' to pick a fight with us? I ain't gonna take this lyin' down like some chicken shit mofo. Anyway, git yo' ass right over here!"

"No, wait...!"

Without waiting for Haruaki's explanation, a man grabbed his arm. Haruaki had no idea where they intend to take him but surely it was not going to be a happy place. Reflexively, he stood his ground and secured his stance. Just as the gangsters clicked their tongues with displeasure—

"You guys—! He already said you mistook him for someone else, violence is not allowed—!"

Using both hands, Sovereignty shoved the man on his chest. From her perspective, this was probably a light "push"—But since she was no ordinary human, the man was sent flying a couple meters by her push, falling flat on the ground.

"Oh no..."

"Tsk... Y-You damn kid...!"

"Th-This isn't good! I've no idea what's going on, but let's run away first!"

Haruaki pulled Sovereignty's hand and ran. Naturally, the men chased after them with great alarm on their faces. One of them even used his cellphone to call for reinforcements—

"W-What did we do?"

"Apart from pushing that guy over just now, nothing at all!"

The two of them ran desperately inside the department store. Going upstairs would only end up getting stuck in the crowd, so they decided to run downstairs. Although they were just talking about leaving the place, never did they expect they would be rushing to the exit at full speed like this. Dashing down the stairs, they switched to the escalator as soon as they discovered an ambush, then traversed the next floor to find another staircase to descend.

"Very good, we're almost there...!"

"Hold it right there, bastard!"

"Woah~ They're chasing from that side too—!?"

The stairs to the ground level were just before their eyes but a group of murderous thugs were appearing from the side. Would it be possible to reach the stairs before the pursuers caught them? After all, it was so close!

But just at that moment, something fell over right by the gangsters' feet. This was a statue of a white-haired, white-suited elderly gentleman that originally stood before a shop's entrance. The men were tripped over as a result.

"Thank you, Colonel Sanders...!"

It almost seemed as though someone had timed perfectly to kick the statue flying, but there was no time to question the matter. Haruaki and Sovereignty rushed down the stairs and dashed outside without waiting for the automatic doors to open fully.

Thinking they were free at last, it turned out to be short-lived joy because a noisy clatter of footsteps instantly came from behind. Those gangsters still had not give up yet. Haruaki really wished they could devote some of that vigor towards contributing to society.

"Haruaki-kun, this way! Let's hide first!"

"Oh okay!"

Sovereignty was pointing to a narrow gap between two buildings, less than a meter wide. Hiding into there with their clothes rubbing against the walls, however—

"Gah, this is too narrow! Let's hide somewhere else—"

"We have no choice now that we've reached this point—! S-Squeeze in, squeeze in!"

"No way, it's really not working!"

Although they did everything to squeeze in, it really was quite cramped. At this moment, the idea of entering sequentially suddenly popped up in Haruaki's mind had he known earlier, but it was already too late at this point. No matter what—

"Damn it, where those mofos escape?"

"Split up and chase them down! You guys go that way!"

"Gotcha!"

Although Haruaki could catch slight glimpses of the group of men, fortunately, they did not look into the gap. Their clattering footsteps could be heard receding into the distance.

"Phew... Who knows what'll happen next...?"

"No idea—They'll probably give up after a while. Let's endure this a bit longer."

Just as Haruaki replied "okay" simply, he noticed the current situation.

Packed like sardines.

That was the only description Haruaki could think of. After all, since the two of them had entered this narrow gap simultaneously, this was hardly unexpected. But their bodies were packed tightly together, almost as one.

Their faces were in extremely close proximity. As for their lower bodies, the four legs were crossed together. Simply turning his body would mean touching Sovereignty's thigh through her skirt. The situation with their upper bodies was even worse. A certain volume possessed by Sovereignty—soft, warm and elastic—was being flattened between their two bodies—

Sovereignty smiled demurely and looked up at Haruaki.

"Umm... S-Sorry, this is getting in the way, right? A little smaller would be better..."

"N-No, nothing of that—sort. Rather, how should I say this? Whether big or small, it's just a personal characteristic, at least I'm not going to criticize anyone because of that... Wait a sec, I don't even know what I'm talking about anymore, uh—"

Seeing Haruaki rambling incomprehensibly, Sovereignty laughed lightly and said:

"Ahaha, I wasn't talking about personal preferences but the problem of size instead. But I see now. I've gained some valuable information—Yes, this feels quite fair to me. Excellent."

"Fair?"

"Oh, pretend I never said anything just now. Just pretend and forget about it. Uh—What I mean is that there'd be more space if it were smaller, making things easier. Basically that."

"Oh okay~ That's true, but what on earth..."

At this moment, Haruaki recalled a fact. Like Fear and the others, Sovereignty was a little different from ordinary people. Hence—in her case, the size of her chest could be adjusted.

"I was thinking 'it'd be nice if things became less tight~' But then there's a problem."

"What problem?"

"Uh— ...Growing in size is easier but shrinking is a bit harder. Umm, because I can't do it simply by yelling 'transform' to get an instant change."

Haruaki met gazes with Sovereignty whose cheeks were blushing and—

"...Physical stimulation is needed. And right now, my hands can't really move so Haruaki-kun, I can only ask you to help me rub—"

"Denied—!"

What kind of nonsense was this child talking about?

"I-I don't mind! I don't find the current posture uncomfortable, so there's no problem at all! Okay, let's just gossip while waiting for things to calm down!"

"Is it really okay? I really hope so..."

In any case, Sovereignty was apparently persuaded. Although this did not change the fact that those soft things were pressing against him, Haruaki tried his hardest to not think about that area and quietly waited for time to pass. After a while, they could no longer feel any signs of those men out on the streets.

"How troubling. It should be fine to go outside now, right?"

"Yeah. Well, the final and main thing I wanted to buy, can we go get it now? It's not located downtown, so I think those people won't find us there."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Ehehe... Actually, it's a Shinto shrine."

"I'd never guess that your main goal would be that weird a place. I don't mind at all."

Hence, the two of them prepared to exit the gap. Although Haruaki tried to slide his back out, the friction with the wall was hurting like hell. He tried to withdraw his leg but for some reason, seductive moans of "Ah..." could be heard. Even if he wanted to move his hands, there was nothing to grab onto.

"I'm sorry, could you exit first?"

"Heave-ho... N-No good. I can't move."

"...I can't move either."

This meant there was a huge problem.

Neither of them could get out.

Silently, they looked at each other for a while.

"Looks like there's no choice but to... rub?"

"Denied—!"

Part 5

Fear was pondering two problems. The first concerned the two people who were stuck in a gap, packed tightly in quite a predicament. Fear could not help but feel an urge to grab Haruaki's hand and pull him out by force. Although this could very likely cause him great pain from the friction, it would be just right as punishment. But for now, she must suppress the impulse first.

Then the other problem was—

"But it's too weird no matter what. Those two definitely did not do anything to provoke those hoodlums. But if they really recognized the wrong person, their behavior seemed too serious for that... Can we really be sure that Haruaki and Sovereignty hadn't said anything that disrespected those guys, or done something that shamed them in some way?"

Fear murmured while hiding behind a pharmacy's frog.^[1] Konoha nodded, very much in agreement.

"That's right... Upon further thought, take that stone in the park, I think it's appearance was too much of a coincidence. Then there's the intrusion into the fitting stall. There could very well be some other cause instead of Haruaki-kun's own intent."

"Hmm, that almost sounds like someone is targeting Haruaki. Come to think of it... Back when the stone was thrown at Haruaki, I noticed a certain person acting rather suspiciously. As for the person, I have some ideas but I dunno if I'm just imagining things. Shiraho, what do you think?"

Konoha stared at Shiraho. Although she remained expressionless for a while, her eyes began to waver slightly—Watching Haruaki and Sovereignty escape from the gap with much difficulty, she finally sighed as though surrendering.

"It looks like my ominous feeling was completely on mark."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was probably not long before the midterms. I keep feeling this strange gaze, such as during school or when I went shopping... But only when I'm together with Sovereignty, not when I'm by myself. I originally thought I was imagining things, but judging from what's happened, that's probably not the case."

Closing her eyes, she exhaled again.

Next, when Shiraho opened her eyes again, her face displayed nothing except her usual cold hostility.

"To be frank, it's probably... a stalker. The target is not me but Sovereignty."

The shrine was located on a little hill somewhere, quite some distance away from the commercial district. Unlike the bustling urban area earlier, it was filled with peace and tranquility.

"Did you come here to pay homage to the shrine?"

"Mmmfufu—I don't think it really counts as one—"

Passing through the ancient torii, they entered the desolate shrine. While following behind Sovereignty who was checking out the surroundings, Haruaki stepped into the shrine's confines. The gravel crunched underfoot, producing a most pleasing sound to the ears.

Sovereignty's footsteps crunched. Haruaki's footsteps also crunched.

Then someone's footsteps behind them—made crunching noises a beat slower.

"..."

Haruaki looked back to find a boy with a shoulder bag. His appearance lacked notable characteristics but somehow Haruaki got the feeling he had seen him somewhere before—Or maybe not—?

(Oh, he's the guy at the superintendent's office yesterday...?)

Haruaki recalled him. The upperclassman who had brushed past them for an instant. In other words, he was the student whom Zenon had complained about frequent visits to the office despite a clear lack of important things to talk about.

"Eh? You're... Uh—"

"Why..."

Sovereignty tilted her head in puzzlement as she spoke. The other person interrupted her. His furious eyes glared directly at Haruaki as he spoke:

"Why are you dating this kind of guy!? To think I pay so much attention to you!"

"...Huh?"

Sovereignty tilted her head even further but Haruaki finally understood. He understood the simple words the boy had uttered. This guy seemed to be quite dangerous.

"To think I've always paid attention to you. No matter whether you're out shopping or at school, I've always watched you... I even ran all the way to the superintendent's office in order to see you!"

"Y-You've always paid attention to me, why?"

"Isn't that obvious? Because I love you! I love you..."

He laughed with a slightly dazed expression then he said forcefully:

"...I love you in your maid outfit!"

Indeed, this was also quite dangerous in a certain sense. And once again, Haruaki understood those simple words of his. Furthermore, more than fearing him, Haruaki felt that it would be more correct to regard him with eyes of pity.

"But you ended up with this kind of boy, this kind of boy... Unforgivable! You've not only made a mistake, but I also need to punish that boy no matter what!"

"Punish...? ...C-Could it be that those accidents earlier were all of your doing?"

"That's right. That kind of guy deserves to have his skull cracked by a stone, deserves to be arrested by the police as a sexual predator who intrudes into fitting rooms, deserves to be abducted by gangsters... Haha, I told the gangsters roaming the streets every bad thing I could come up with and that the one looking down on their gang was you. Very clever of me, right?"

Thinking "Umm, that's not really something worth being proud about," Haruaki held his tongue. After all, he was still a little apprehensive about the slowly approaching guy.

"However, I can't stand it anymore. To think he would take to such... such a cramped space to engage in lewdness... Get away from him now. I shall personally bring down the hammer of justice upon that boy!"

"N-No, stop it! If you don't stop this, I'm very sorry but I'll have no choice but to stop you!"

"S-Sovereignty..."

"Don't worry, Haruaki-kun. It would be bad if he's carrying some kind of bladed weapon."

Sovereignty stepped forward and entered a stance, fists mildly clenched. Her body differed somewhat from a normal human's. But if one had to explain further, if the boy truly loved Sovereignty, he probably would not want to hurt her for real—Hence, there was no reason for her to lose. Although Haruaki felt ashamed for being protected by a girl, it would be better to let her handle the current situation, right?

Just as Haruaki was thinking that, the boy cackled malevolently and said:

"Then it can't be helped—Watch this!"

He took a certain object from his shoulder bag. Then using it as a shield, he raised it in front of his body while extending a boxcutter's blade to press against it. So that turned out to be the hostage. He was treating that as a hostage. Indeed—

He was treating a maid outfit, fluttering in the air, as a hostage.

"..." "

Dumbfounded.

At a loss for quite a while, Sovereignty turned her head back stiffly and asked:

"Uh... May I go ahead and beat him up."

"Be my guest."

Haruaki answered immediately, but—

"Hey, wait! This is your work outfit, in other words, it's your way of life! Are you fine with seeing harm come to your meaning of life? I've always felt that you were more suited to maid outfits than anyone else, the maid among maids... Your entire existence devoted to the concept of maids, you can't possibly care nothing about this outfit! Is your love for maids only this shallow!?"

"A-Ahhh! Love...! That's right, I-I-I am very proud of the job of maids... Umm, are you trying to confirm that love of mine...?"

"Indeed that's right! Okay, then are you still going to punch me?"

"Urgggghh... No! I.. can't!"

"Excuse me—The two of you—?"

Feeling exasperated by their idiotic dialogue, Haruaki tried to interject but was ignored. "What should I do?" He thought.

Treating the maid outfit as a hostage, the boy was slowly approaching.

Making a combat stance, gnashing her teeth at the sight before her was Sovereignty.

The seemingly tense face off, but was actually nothing of that sort, lasted a minute or so, then—

Haruaki suddenly knew that the standoff was about to end. However—

It was not because Sovereignty and the boy did anything different.

Rather, this was because Haruaki saw a familiar drill thrusting out from the thicket behind the boy.

...Several seconds passed.

The poor stalker was subdued to the ground, trembling without saying a word.

Rather than piercing with the drill, Fear had casually swept it sideways to strike the boy squarely in the flank. Using some kind of aikido technique, Konoha had effortlessly thrown the guy. The two girls had now stopped attacking and were watching the scene before them with expressions that were difficult to describe. This was because only one person was assaulting the boy with increasing intensity—namely, Shiraho.

"Contemptible! Contemptible... What on earth... are you... thinking!? To dare make a move on that child, did you think you could get away scot-free? You... Trash, insect, even lower than humans...!"

Arms crossed before her chest, she kept stepping on the boy's backside repeatedly. For some reason, her face was locked into a super furious sneer. There was nothing more terrifying than that.

"Say... something, okay... Hey, are you listening? Could it be that you haven't had enough of me stepping on you? You wish for me to step harder? You even want to be flattened pitifully like a bug? You wish to be further trampled to such a sad state that you become trash impossible to categorize, is that it? Then it cannot be helped. Take this! Take this! Fufu, ufufu...!"

"E-Excuse me, Shiraho-san...?"

"I think we should end things here... Probably better that way...?"

After Konoha and Fear spoke, Shiraho slowly looked up. Locked on by her ice-cold smile, Fear was so startled that her shoulders shook. Shiraho said:

"Hey, lend that to me."

"Y-You mean this perforator here? N-No, no way! I think something terrifying might happen...!"

Fear frantically hid the drill behind her back. Shiraho's ice-cold smile finally disappeared at this time. Finding things no fun at all, she made a nasal sound and said:

"...Hmph. Whatever."

Next, Shiraho began to look around as though searching for something. Arms crossed before her chest, she continued to keep one foot stepping on the boy's rear end. After spotting a certain object, she murmured as though to herself:

"...That stone lion... I wonder if it could be moved from its pedestal..."

What did she intend to do by moving the stone lion?

Terrified to the bottom of their hearts, Haruaki's group began to try their best to dissuade Shiraho.

"By the way, why are you here, Shiraho? Don't you have supplementary lessons?"

"Eh? Umm... Umm..."

"I want to ask Fear the same question. Speaking of which, Konoha, didn't you say you were working today?"

Haruaki spoke with a cold gaze. Fear and Konoha whimpered together and avoided eye contact. The aura of a guilty conscience was exuding from their entire being.

"L-Let's not worry about that. Anyway, I'm sorry, Sovereignty. I should have discovered the existence of this guy earlier."

Shiraho clearly wanted to change the subject. Sovereignty shook her head and said:

"No, I'm to blame for not noticing. Shiraho, you don't need to apologize."

"Sigh... Had I known from the start, I'd never have let you go shopping outside. However, I did have this ominous feeling, which is why I asked this human to stay by your side just in case."

Haruaki recalled what happened at the superintendent's office. Prompted by her, he was reminded of how there was something off about Shiraho's behavior from the start. So that was why she had, in her own words, asked him to take on the role of a knight... But in terms of results, all Haruaki managed to do was act as bait to draw out the stalker.

"On the other hand, why did you come to a shrine? There should be something you want to buy, right?"

"Oh right! Wait for me a bit, okay!?"

Sovereignty rushed ahead. Rather than the shrine's main hall, she was running towards the vendor area on the side. Loudly yelling "Excuse me~!" to call out people from the shrine, she bought something and ran back—

"Here, take this. A present for you, Shiraho."

"This is..."

Handed over to Shiraho was a talisman bearing the words "academic accomplishment." Surprised, Shiraho kept staring at the talisman and Sovereignty.

"Umm... I... wanted to help cheer you on, Shiraho. Seeing you work so hard to study before the exams, but the results didn't turn out very well, you seem quite frustrated, so I..."

"..."

"Sorry, all I can do is... this kind of small stuff. Shiraho, since you rarely attended school lessons in the past, maybe you reached a bottleneck because you're unable to adjust to school life... But I will stay by your side. Do you understand? I will cheer for you, so please continue to do your best."

"—!"

Instantly, Shiraho embraced Sovereignty tightly without saying a word. Startled into exclaiming "Wah!", Sovereignty immediately smiled and hugged Shiraho in return.

A most heartwarming—

Lovers' embrace.

Watching this unfold, Haruaki could not help but smile while stroking Fear's head beside him.

"Hey, Haruaki! What are you doing? I'll curse you!"



"Looks like when the end of term exams roll around, apart from Class Rep, we'll have another companion joining us."

"Muu..."

"Aha, yes. The more the better. Looks like studying as a group will become more and more fun."

Konoha made a gentle smile.

"Hmph... However, this also can't be helped... Let my English ability pour forth into the brave soul who failed every single subject. But of course, I demand rice crackers in return."

Fear nodded proudly. Although it was a bit difficult, Haruaki could hear some sort of anticipation hidden in her words.

"The word 'failed' reminds of something. Okay, Fear, tell me about your supplementary lessons."

"Guh..."

"No way? Could~ it~ be~ that you actually skipped your lessons? That's going way out of line, right? If you really skipped, then I really must raise my voice and do some scolding—"

"U-Ummm..."

"And seriously, Konoha, since you're together with her, why didn't you stop her? You have to force her even if coercion is required, otherwise, that's not in her best interests. And the same goes for you, why didn't you go to work? If you take time off without a legitimate reason, you're causing trouble for the shopkeeper!"

"N-No umm... Th-There's many complicated reasons going on here..."

Unsure where to direct their gazes, Fear and Konoha suddenly looked at each other and nodded. Coughing at the same time to clear their throats, they spoke up:

"No, there's something more important than that. I demand answers from you!"

"That's right! Put your hand on your heart and recall carefully today, what have you been doing all day!?"

"What—? How could you two interrogate me instead?"

"Shut up with the nonsense! Or else I'll curse you! Listen to me carefully, from the first moment when you met up, you've been making shameless faces and laughing idiotically. We felt shameful just from the sight of it. I wouldn't be surprised if you were arrested for it—"

"You went 'Ah—' and had her feed you, right? You even licked her fingers, right? You even charged into the fitting area stall and hugged Shiraho-san, right? Then the two of you even squeezed into a narrow space and rubbed back and forth—"

"I'd like to make many objections, but it's totally unfair that you're ganging up on me, two against one!"

Haruaki turned his head to seek help, meeting gazes with Sovereignty and Shiraho who were still tightly embraced together. Sovereignty was smiling happily. In a rare moment, Shiraho was also giggling with laughter.

Next, she began to speak up as though going "you leave me no choice."

Ahhh~ She's willing to help me. That's right, I was trying hard to be a knight. I did quite well today, I'd say. Hence, she must be acknowledging my efforts by extending a helping hand willingly—

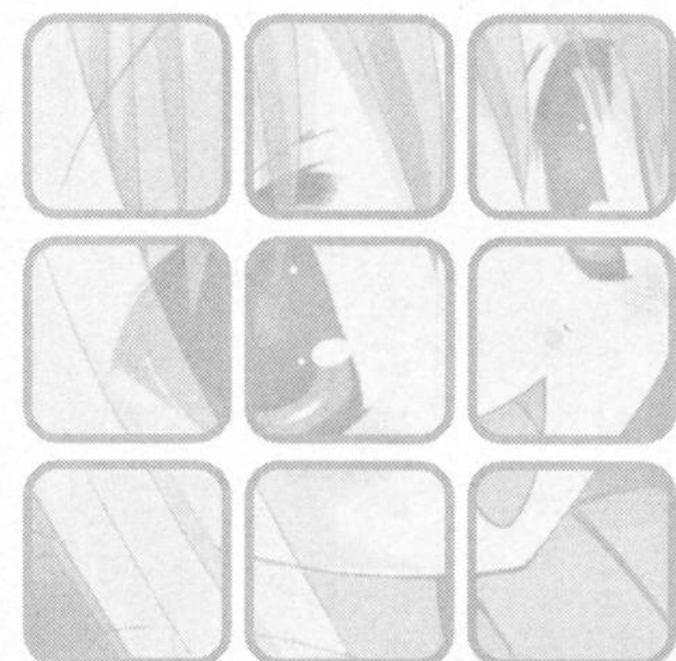
That was what Haruaki thought.

Shiraho's calm expression felt almost like a smile from the Virgin Mary.

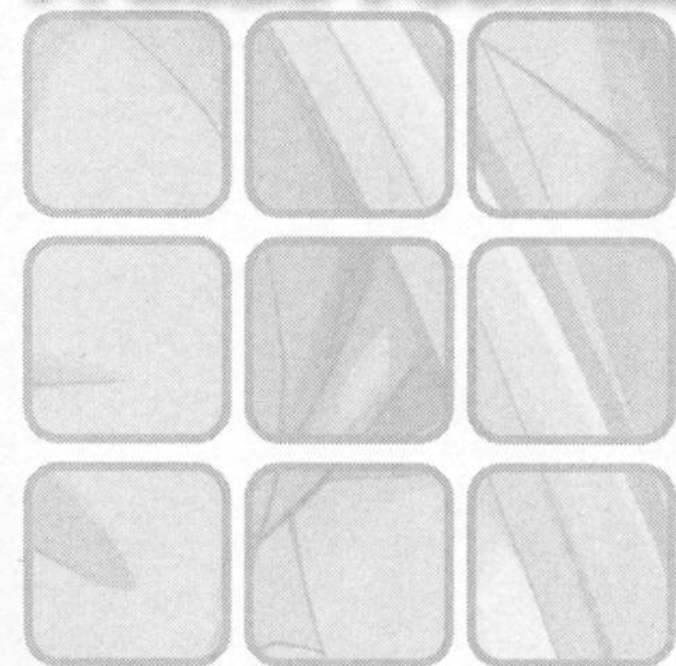
Haruaki heard her use an excessively gentle voice:

"By the way, there's a bug that needs to be squashed even more urgently than this stalker. Say, you girls over there, could you help me move that stone lion?"

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



はじめてのおまつり／
A little reckoning day



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 3 - The First Shrine Festival / "A little reckoning day"

Part 1

Clackety-clack, clackety-clackety-clack.

"Geta clogs are so fun. Yo! Ho! Ha!"

"Hey Fear, don't run so fast, you'll fall—"

In a leaping manner, the silver-haired girl rushed up the stone steps leading up to the shrine. Following behind, Haruaki called out to stop her. Wearing a hair style different from usual, the lively sounds of the girl's clogs halted as she suddenly looked back and said:

"What are you talking about? You guys are too slow! Ohoh! The scent of something tasty is drifting from above! What is up there? What if it gets sold out!? Move it, hurry and come up!"

Frequently turning her attention to the shrine's confines, Fear impatiently waved her hands and yelled towards them. This motion caused the sleeves of her refreshingly colored yukata to flutter in response.

"It won't get sold out so easily. Could you calm down a bit?"

"But it can't be helped that she's acting like this, right? Isn't it the first time for Ficchi to experience this kind of situation?"

Konoha had an exasperated expression while Kuroe was sleepy-eyed as usual. Like Fear, they were both dressed in yukatas. Furthermore, Konoha had pulled a male yukata out from who knows where, causing Haruaki, who was not used to wearing yukatas, to wear one despite having no initial intention to do so.

"Konoha is right. The stalls aren't going to run off, so we should walk slowly. After all, it's very easy to fall over when wearing geta clogs, so running is even more dangerous."

"What~? That's totally underestimating me! How could I fall over from something of this level? Let's cut the nonsense and hurry—"

Perhaps trying to drag Haruaki's hand and run forward, Fear jumped to the next stone step. Just at that moment—

—She slipped.

"Wawa?"

"Idiot, didn't I just tell you—!?"

Haruaki reflexively tried to catch Fear but he instantly realized his mistake. Similar situations had clearly happened many times before, why had he not learnt his lesson yet?

He successfully got into a position under Fear who was falling from the stone steps. In a certain sense, he had succeeded in catching her. However—

"Guah! W-Why did I end up suffering a kneeing attack on my shoulder?"

"How would I know? It's your fault for being underneath!"

"H-Haruaki-kun, it's dangerous—!"

"Lemme help as well—Heave-ho!"

"K-Kuroe-san, if you want to help support, you should be supporting Haruaki-kun's back! That side is my bottom!"

"Of course I know that."

Konoha was desperately supporting Haruaki's back while he was toppling backwards from Fear's weight while Kuroe was using her tiny hands to push against Konoha. Who knew if Kuroe was really helping in support or engaging in sexual harassment.

"So heavy! Fear, get down, I'm about to be flattened by you!"

"W-What are you talking about? I'll curse you! I'm not heavy, okay! You shameless brat—To punish your lack of delicacy, let me take this opportunity to do this!"

No sooner had she said that, sitting on Haruaki's shoulder, Fear squirmed and altered her body's direction. Straddling Haruaki's head and sitting down, she ended up completely in a piggyback position on his shoulders.

"Fufu~ Now it's okay."

"Hey, that's very dangerous! Get down now!"

"Shut up, Cow Tits. As long as this guy holds up properly, there won't be a problem."

"Yes yes yes, you need to show your ambition as a man, Haru."

"I don't really know what kind of ambition that is... But whatever, it feels like forcing her to get down here would be even more dangerous. No other way, let's continue onwards."

Carrying Fear on his shoulders in this manner, Haruaki slowly made his way up the stone steps.

The aroma entering his nostrils along the way was that of a distinctive sauce. Probably from takoyaki octopus balls or yakisoba fried noodles? Above his head, Fear's little hands were drumming on Haruaki's hair as though in sync with the festival music coming from inside the shrine. Through that rhythm, Haruaki could feel her curiosity and excitement that could not be suppressed.

Haruaki could understand more or less why she was so excited.

Indeed, it had been quite a while since he had visited a shrine festival. It had been quite a while since they went to a festival as an entire family.

(Besides, I actually didn't really want to go in the beginning. So I guess I should thank this girl.)

While moving up the stone steps, Haruaki recalled how the decision was made to visit the festival.

A nostalgic noise and bustle—However, for Fear it was the first experience of this type of noise and bustle—was lying right before their eyes.

Part 2

One evening after returning from school...

Having finished the preparations for cooking dinner, Haruaki was taking a break in the living room because it was still too early start cooking. Fear returned from the stroll she started as soon as she returned home. With both hands behind her back, she seemed to be hiding something.

"I-I'm home... Fufufu, say, Haruaki..."

Smiling weirdly, she approached slowly. Sitting side by side and sipping tea, Haruaki and Konoha exchanged glances then smiled. Pointing out of the house, Haruaki said:

"—Put it back. Didn't you learn your lesson last time?"

"What? Th-This isn't what you think!"

"A dog? Or a cat? I know, it must be something quite unusual, like a ferret or something, right?"

"Like I said, it's not what you think! Listen to me, or else I'll curse you! What I brought back is this!"

Quite miffed, Fear handed over a flyer. Haruaki and Konoha looked at the piece of paper together.

"Let's see... 'Bountiful Harvest, Autumn Festival announcement'...?"

"Oh, it's the shrine up ahead, right? Speaking of which, it is that time of the year huh... But you wouldn't happen to be thinking... of going?"

Fear nodded up and down vigorously with eyes showing great anticipation.

"Hmm—Right, I guess you haven't taken part in this type of festivities yet~"

"E-Exactly! I've heard that festivals are really fun. Say, Haruaki~, can we go?"

"The date is... Today? No matter what, isn't that too rushed? Besides, we've already finished the preparations for dinner."

"Just eat it for a midnight snack or breakfast tomorrow. Aren't there so many ways to take care of food?"

Fear had a point, but honestly speaking, it was a bit troublesome.

Wondering what Konoha thought, Haruaki turned his head. Since she was always nagging the most about Fear's impetuous willfulness, she was probably uninterested this time as well—Just as Haruaki thought that...

"Festival... Not going... Yukata... A different look for me... Heart racing events...!"

Murmuring nonstop, she suddenly widened her eyes and said:

"Let's go, Haruaki-kun!"

"What an unexpected reaction? I thought you didn't like going to crowded places?"

"Wow~ Cow Tits! I must praise you for making the right choice this time!"

Konoha coughed and cleared her throat. Then she continued:

"I simply believe that participating in this type of activity would be nice once in a while. Let me make myself clear. I have not been biding my time for an opportunity ever since the summer festival. Neither have I missed out because I was unable to speak up when the two of us were alone. Nothing like that at all. Absolutely."

Haruaki could not quite get what she was talking about, but anyway, he understood that she was quite interested in going.

"However... Ah, you girls should know that it'd be unfair to Kuroe if the three of us went without her. But if we wait for her to close up shop, the festival would have ended already—"

"Looking for me?"

"Where did you pop out from?"

Somehow, Kuroe was already sitting at the table. She was even asking for tea on her own, going "Kono-san, me too—"

"What about your shop...?"

"Closing up slightly earlier today for a break. After all, there are no appointments. Also, my pleasure detector sensed strongly that something fun was brewing."

"That's the first time I've heard of that kind of detector..."

While groaning, Haruaki realized that resistance was futile. On the other hand, he was not particularly opposed to the idea except for a mild sense that it was troublesome.

"Got it. In that case, let's all go and check it out."

Instantly, Fear stood up, her face in all smiles. Shaking her fist to make a victorious pose, she said:

"Nwa—! It's finally here, I can finally make my debut at a festival! Ooh, what food will there be? I wonder if there will be sacred rice crackers used as offerings for gods... I can't wait to find out!"

"No, I can tell you for certain that it doesn't exist."

"Having decided that we're going, preparations must be made—Fufu, it's been so long since I last wore a yukata..."

Fear glared with her eyes wide towards Konoha who was about to return to her room.

"I knew it all along, Cow Tits. The clothing known as yukata is the proper attire for festivals. It's too unfair if you're the only one wearing it, so I want one too!"

"Oh~ I do have quite a few, in fact... But they can't possibly fit you. If all you wish is to try them on, I won't stop you."

"What do you mean, they can't possibly fit me!? Haruaki and Kuroe, you wait here. Since it's Cow Tits after all, it's possible she'll deliberately give me a yukata that doesn't fit. Once I'm changed, you two give me your opinion."

As a result, the two girls rushed out of the living room. Next, Haruaki heard loud noises and impacts coming from Konoha's room. Staying in the living room, Haruaki and Kuroe drank tea quietly.

"Speaking of clothes not fitting, I remember something similar happening before..."

"Okay okay, Haru. In any case, let's look forward to Ficchi's fashion show."

Several minutes later, slow footsteps approached the living room. Then the paper door slid open and standing there was—

"..."

Fear, expressionless from forcibly suppressing her emotions.

Naturally, she was wearing a yukata, one whose fabric was embroidered with a pretty hydrangea pattern... However, the chest area was very loose, her fingertips were almost completely covered by the sleeves, and the loose hem was dragging on the tatami floor. Taken altogether with the sash that just managed to tie the loose yukata together at the waist—What

should one say? Summed up in a single sentence—One probably could not find another dwarf like her in the entire world.

Haruaki and Kuroe shook their heads silently.

Fear rapidly slid the paper door shut and returned to Konoha's room. Then a few minutes later—

"..."

With an increasingly grim expression, Fear made her appearance again, this time in a pretty aqua-blue yukata. Apart from that, her state was no different from last time. Haruaki really felt like nicknaming her "Miss Dwarf" as a result.

The paper door slid shut again as a patter of footsteps gradually receded into the distance.

"...Could you find a suitable opportunity to make her a suggestion? Don't you have quite a few yukatas yourself?"

"I planned to lend her one from the start."

"If that's the case, why didn't you say so earlier!?"

Haruaki stared at Kuroe in surprise but all she made was a glazed-eye expression as usual with a subtle smile on her face.

"If I did that, I would've lost a chance to photograph Ficchi's rare appearances."

At this moment, Haruaki could hear two sounds in his speechlessness.

Approaching footsteps that betrayed the owner's depressed spirits yet refusing to give up.

In addition, there were the minute sounds of a digital camera's operation coming from inside Kuroe's hair.

Part 3

Thinking "finally I can get changed in peace," Konoha was sighing alone in her room.

"There's clearly no need for her to antagonize me so much... Seriously!"

In the end, Fear borrowed a yukata from Kuroe and the two had gone off to Kuroe's room in the accessory dwelling. Coming up next was Konoha's own chance to make a decisive impression.

She took the newest yukata that she originally intended to wear during the summer festival. Naturally, this was her best yukata in a certain sense, hence she did not allow Fear to try it on—Konoha did not mind if this was considered cheating. Besides, she already knew from the very start that given Fear's sizes, none of her yukatas were going to fit.

Konoha happily changed into her yukata and examined her appearance. Yes, absolutely perfect. Taking care in selecting yukatas was definitely worth the effort.

"What should I do...? Should I change my hairstyle~?"

Kuroe would definitely treat Fear like a doll and try all sorts of yukatas on her, which meant that there should be plenty of time. Konoha resolved herself and untied her twin braids.

Speaking of the yukata, one would naturally think of the back of the neck. Ever since ancient times, Japanese men would admire the seductiveness of feminine necks exposed by the yukata, unobscured by hair... Thinking "That goes without saying!", Konoha rearranged and coiled up her hair, combing it to form a bun. Then securing her hair with a conservatively colored hairpin that did not conflict with the yukata's impression of purity, everything was complete.

Standing before the mirror, Konoha spun to check out her overall appearance. This was... not... bad... No, rather, it should be quite excellent, right? Not only was there a sense of freshness but also a greater impression of purity, combined with the sexiness of her exposed neck as well...!

"Ufu. Ufufufu."

What sort of reaction would he make?

Rather than an exaggerated response of "Wow, it looks great, so cute!" (of course, she would still feel very happy to hear that from him), if he were to "inadvertently let slip" something like "Oh, adorable...", sincerely from the heart, that would be even better.

"Indeed. He'll probably say something like 'that hairstyle looks quite nice too~' ...as well? The use of 'quite' is very important since it conveys that he is serious and sincerely believes so and also says that he pays attention to my usual self but notices my fresh look today. Then if he were to feel something like 'Eh, could this feeling be...?' then really getting that feeling for real...! Ufufufufu!"

Konoha was standing alone in front of the mirror, murmuring to herself, laughing uncontrollably, feeling shy.

After repeating her strange behavior for quite a while, Konoha clenched her fist, went "Very well!" and exited her room.

Arriving before the living room, she took a deep breath. The first impression was of paramount importance and she absolutely could not miss his reaction.

As soon as she heard the sounds of tea sipping stop—

"I-I've changed into my yukata. Umm, how do you find it, Haruaki-kun? If possible, could you give your opinion—"

"I'm done, Haruaki! Look, look! How is it, this will be my official attire for checking out the festival!"

The instant Konoha entered the living room from the corridor, from the opposite direction—the paper door facing the garden's veranda slid open with a whoosh. Haruaki's gaze was suddenly drawn to Fear's appearance. Then—

"Oh, that's very cute..."

His remark sounded like it slipped out unwittingly.

Twitch.

Temples twitching, Konoha turned to look at Fear.

Because it was Kuroe's yukata, the size was quite a good fit on her. Despite the childish impression, this unbelievable combination actually served to complement her lively and adorable traits. Furthermore—

"Ohoh~ That hair style looks quite nice too~"

"Fufu, it looks good, right? Although I don't really like that tightly bound feeling, it's not bad to try it once in a while."

Konoha was furious to the point of gnashing her teeth.

Twin tails... Twin tails! So unfair! In terms of elegance, she had clearly defeated Fear. No wait, Fear must have known that, hence the choice of a hairstyle that highlighted her lively and energetic personality...? Absolutely beyond a doubt, this came from the designs of a renowned strategist!

"Hmm?"

Standing behind Fear in a yukata was Kuroe who was going purely for the young girl route. If one were to hand her a paper windmill, she would probably look like a child plucked out from antiquity. But currently held in her hand was a traditional, round, paper fan, even though summer had clearly passed already... She was probably going for the mood it created?

"Kono-san is done changing too. Nothing less expected from Kono-san."

"Hmm... Your look is basically the same. Glasses plus giant tits like a dairy cow's—Your two main elements haven't changed, so it won't be a reach to say that your boring getup is completely unchanged. I win!"

Perhaps due to Fear's attitude that commanded his attention, Haruaki finally noticed Konoha's presence. Only then did he finally shift his gaze towards her.

Perhaps noticing that the atmosphere around Konoha was a little off, he was taken aback slightly before saying:

"Oh... Oh~ Konoha's finished changing as well! Your hairstyle also looks—v-very good!"

Haruaki raised his voice, a little redundantly.

"Is that so~? I am VERY happy to hear that. Thank you for your praise."

Konoha found her voice exceptionally cold to the extreme.

Part 4

Recalling the many things that happened before they left the house, Haruaki finally reached the top of the stone steps.

"Wow! So many people! Are those small tents the shops? They all sell different things? Ki... ya... ko... ta? Why have I never heard this name before? Is it food?"

"You're reading that banner backwards!"

"Ta... ko... ya... ki—I haven't heard of that either!"

"...Seriously? Anyway, Haruaki-kun, your shoulders must be beginning to ache. It's time to let her down."

Hence, Haruaki lowered Fear back down. But the moment she touched the ground, she could very well rush off and disappear, so Haruaki hastily grabbed one of her twintails, a hairstyle limited to this day only.

"Nuwo! Hey, let me go!"

"If I let go, you'll definitely get lost. Listen carefully and promise me one thing. Do not run off on your own recklessly. If you won't promise me, we're going home immediately."

"Yeah yeah. Promise."

Although Haruaki was not reassured by her halfhearted answer, he still let go. At any rate, Fear's curiosity index had apparently gone off the charts already. Hence, she kept looking in all directions, behaving strangely as though expressing "where should I go? This way or that?"

"So, what's takoyaki~? There's a nice aroma coming from that side. What's that thing that looks like a swimming pool? So intriguing... Ah!"

"What now?"

"I just realized something terrible! I... forgot to bring money!"

Fear pleaded with her eyes. Feeling "there's no need to make that kind of look," Haruaki smiled wryly and said:

"Got it, I'll pay for you. But the way you are now, you'll surely end up buying everything from the stalls, so basically, you need my permission before buying anything."

"Hmm—Well, if you think that works better, I'm fine with it... But it's not everyday that I get to have fun at a festival, so I have to experience buying things I like, because that's the essence of visiting a festival."

"How demanding."

Konoha sighed. Fear was arguing with great effort, just as predicted. Meanwhile, Kuroe kept waving to Fear.

"In that case, Ficchi, let me, as the reliable elder sister, give you some pocket money. With this, Ficchi, you can buy things you really want but Haru objects."

"What!? Are you serious, Kuroe!?"

"Kuroe-san, please don't spoil her..."

"Relax. Ficchi, I'm not giving you money for free. It comes with a condition."

Fear frowned and wondered "condition?" to which Kuroe nodded solemnly and said.

"...Well then, please lean forward first."

"What?"

"Just follow my directions and make the pose. Then look up."

"I really don't get what you mean. L-Like this?"

"Then tilt your head slightly."

"Hmm..."

"Finally, stare straight at me and bite your thumb slightly."

"Mmmuu... What does this have to do with anything? The more I think about it, the more embarrassing this pose seems—!"

"Shutter chance!"

Accompanied by a click, a flash came from inside of Kuroe's hair. Even now, she still had a digital camera hidden in her hair?

Perhaps unable to bear it any longer, Fear went red in the face and approached Kuroe.

"Then, y-you photographed it? You photographed it, right, Kuroe? You photographed my embarrassing appearance just now, right!? I won't take this silently! Hey, I demand that you erase that photo from just now—!"

"Here you go, 500yen. With this, you'll be able to buy at least one thing you want, no matter which shop."

"Uwah—"

"Record-breaking bribery speed!?"



Haruaki was trembling in shock while Konoha sighed dejectedly.

"Thank you, Kuroe... I will spend this money on something that I really want. Okay, Haruaki, preparations are now complete! First, I want to try that takoyaki that's been bothering me from a while ago!"

"Takoyaki huh... It's been quite a while. Since I want to eat it too, I allow you to buy it."

Haruaki originally intended to go with Fear to buy it, but she seemed to be quite enamored with the act of "buying." In any case, since she was within sight, letting her gain some experience was not a bad idea either.

"Buy a box of takoyaki with this money and come back. Don't forget to get the change."

"Okay, you're letting me take on the responsibility of buying things, right? Great, just wait here!"

Hearing her clogs clattering while she ran and yelling at the stall owner "I want a box—!", Haruaki could not help but feel an urge to laugh. The stall owner looked like he had to make some on the spot, so Fear watched the iron pan with great interest, waiting patiently—Suddenly noticing Haruaki's gaze, she proudly made a victory sign with her hand.

Haruaki surveyed the surroundings, thinking "Fear should be alright." All sorts of hustle and bustle, the festival music, the beating of drums, faint sounds of bells from the distance... This space was enveloped by a nostalgic atmosphere. Perhaps there were many people seeking this sense of nostalgia, the surrounding crowd density continued to increase. A moment's carelessness would probably result in getting swept away in the crowd. Just as Haruaki was thinking that—

"—Kyah!"

Feeling a soft and warm sensation against his upper arm, Haruaki discovered that Konoha had collided into him, pushed by the crowd.

"Are you okay?"

"S-Sorry about that. I was pushed and lost my balance."

Konoha smiled shyly. Due to devoting too much energy and attention towards Fear who was liable to acting unpredictably, Haruaki had not noticed until now—Konoha's appearance. Upon further examination, her

current look was quite refreshing. A beautiful yukata, her hair secured behind her head, this combined to expose the back of her neck. So pale, so pale, so pale. Haruaki could not help but feel a sense of immorality, seeing a spot that was normally out of view...

"Umm... Haruaki-kun?"

"Wah! No, umm, sorry. Perhaps I mentioned it just now, but that hairstyle really suits you quite well..."

"You're saying... it looks quite nice, is that so... Ehehe, I'm satisfied with that."

Konoha smiled as though in absolute bliss. Haruaki was quite taken aback in surprise. At the same time, he was also surprised by something that was closer than expected. As the surge of people continued to push him from behind, it looked like there was no choice but to wait until the crowd subsided a little.

"Sorry, it's a bit difficult to move..."

"D-Do not get swept away by the crowd, endure it."

She was completely right, endure it. Although something soft was pressing against his arm, he must endure it. Absolutely avoid thinking in weird directions. An almost inexplicable sense of presence and texture, indeed, although only the fabric of the yukata separated his arm and that feeling, he must be absolutely direct his attention away from that—

"...Uh—Umm, it would be troubling if there's a misunderstanding, so let me clarify beforehand—No, actually I don't really know myself what might be misunderstood."

"W-What do you mean?"

Behind those glasses, her moist eyes looked up at Haruaki from an extremely short distance.

Then she fluttered her lashes in embarrassment.

"I've been wearing this type of Japanese attire since a long time ago... So perhaps it's hard to change old habits, or maybe I just can't calm my mind unless I'm dressed like this... I'm not trying to make an excuse, but in the past, this would be perfectly commonplace and necessary when dressed in traditional Japanese garb, umm..."

"O-Okay... I get it. I don't quite understand, but I get it. So, it'd be a great help if you could stop talking about that subject."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Konoha smiled in her eyes.

"...I made you feel troubled, right? Sorry..."

"N-Not at all, it's not like it's particularly troubling, how should I put this...? R-Right! It's this crowd's fault. Jeez, why can't they pass faster so that we can move!?"

Haruaki craned his neck meaninglessly to look around but Konoha's gaze did not shift. She still continued to look up at Haruaki from close range. He could see her lips moving faintly, then entering Haruaki's ears was—

"...I don't mind, a little longer... maintaining this state..."

Her whispers were too soft so he could not quite catch the words clearly.

For some reason, Haruaki found himself unable to avert his gaze and ended up looking into Konoha's eyes naturally.

The festival's drumming, the surrounding noise, everything seemed so very distant. It was as though the two of them had entered an isolated world of their own.

Was it due to the crowd pushing? Their faces became even closer while her supple body pressed even tighter together.

Then Haruaki found himself completely immobile.

Under these conditions when escaping or even trying to lift a finger was impossible—

—A freshly fried takoyaki ball was stuffed into his mouth.

"Gwooooh!? H-Hot... Hot... Hot—!"

"How's that, tasty? You shameless brat! I just take my eyes off you for a moment and you start doing this!? I can't forgive you at all! Here, want a second one? Yes? Yes?"

"I surrender! I surrender!"

Haruaki covered his mouth in pain. With a demonic expression, Fear took her toothpick and desperately tried to shove another takoyaki ball into his mouth.

The crowd had subsided substantially. In other words, the legitimacy of Haruaki and Konoha's behavior had passed.

Konoha sighed dejectedly and slumped her shoulders.

(A rare chance with a good mood going there... But then again, I think that was too close for comfort. If things continued under that atmosphere—even I... feel that... something requiring mental resolve might occur, or maybe it won't? No, even so, it should be fine. On further thought, I feel like a direct and forceful development might be more effective in obtaining clean results...!)

However, by this point there was no point in dwelling on what could have been. On the other hand, Konoha felt that she had achieved her main goal of displaying her femininity to Haruaki. In any case, it was not a bad achievement.

"...Excessive impatience would not be good, yes, that's right... Speaking of which."

She looked to the side. While Fear was off buying takoyaki, Kuroe had instantly disappeared. For some reason, she had bought an anachronistic fox mask and was standing on the side, wearing her new equipment. With the mask pulled to one of her head, the look seemed to suit her exceptionally well.

"Basically, I'm just asking out of curiosity... Did you snap a shot?"

"Of course."

Kuroe expressionlessly made a thumbs-up as she answered.

Konoha sighed again, then discreetly—but resolutely—whispered to Kuroe:

"Print some for me immediately after we get back. Ten or so should do."

Part 5

Next, Haruaki's group's festival turned into chasing after Fear whenever she rushed off after some stall that caught her eye. Naturally, her interests were not limited to snack stalls but also included game stalls.

Walking around, Fear had a lot of fun and so did Haruaki and the rest. Without getting into how she competed with Konoha for the largest stuffed doll at a shooting contest but both of them ended up wasting all their ammunition, right now, Fear almost started a fight with a shopkeeper at a seldom encountered multicolored chicken stall due to yelling "What!? To think it's just spray painted, unforgivable!" Granted it was fun, but a little excessively violent.

Haruaki and Konoha kept bowing their heads in apology to the shopkeeper and finally managed to diffuse the situation. Next, they came to a katanuki^[2] diecutting stall.

"Nwah... It broke—! This is too difficult, Mr. Shopkeeper!"

"Hehehe, if it's that easy to win, then this old man woulda gone out of business a long time ago~"

"This needle is so small and hard to hold... The result might be different if I use a tool I'm more used to. Say, Mr. Shopkeeper, can I swap tools?"

"Hmm? That's not fair to the other customers. Please just bear with it."

"Hmm~ You have a point there. That's right, competitions must be fair. Ahaha!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Seeing the two of them laughing together, Haruaki trembled in terror. Mr Shopkeeper, today sure is your lucky day. Had you given the okay, this girl would have taken out something like a drill.

Meanwhile, things were going smoothly for a certain young girl.

"...«Chaplin» complete. «Ortho-Xylene Molecule» complete. «Byoudou-in Phoenix Hall» complete."^[3]

"What? These are all S-class models, to think you effortlessly completed them...! Little girl, who on earth are you?"

"Fufufu, how could you not know who I am? Mister, are you new here?"

"Ah! That long, black hair, sleepy eyes and petite physique... Perhaps you're the legendary «Festival-Wrecking Black Princess»? P-Please have mercy on the little folk like me! I have elderly parents and three young children to support!"

In the end, Kuroe soon let the shopkeeper off, but not before winning every single prize at the stall.

Fear spun around while licking the milk candy Kuroe shared with her and said:

"Y-You're amazing, Kuroe. Is there some trick to it? Tell me!"

"I guess there is a trick... But for you, Ficchi, it might be a bit difficult."

Still sleepy-eyed, Kuroe continued nonchalantly:

"The needle in my hand is just a red herring. In actual fact, I use a hardened hair to secretly carve out the mold—"

"Isn't that cheating!?"

"But that stall just now deliberately dulled the needles to make the mold difficult to carve. I only use this trick against unscrupulous stalls like this one—"

"..."

Even so, the shopkeeper was still too pitiful. Hence, Haruaki had Kuroe return the untouched prizes.

Next, they conquered quite a few stalls. Fear bounced the hard-earned water balloon on her palm while walking with happy footsteps along the path which was lined with stalls.

"How's this? I'm amazing, right? Haruaki!"

"Amazing amazing, but if you bounce it too hard, it's gonna break instantly."

"Also, could you look carefully where you're going. Otherwise, you'll collide into someone... Oh!"

Just as Konoha said that, a boy, who looked like a grade schooler, was running head on and happened to bump into Fear. Apart from Fear not

paying attention in front, it was also due to the boy looking backwards while he ran.

"Oh?"

"Ouch! ...Th-That really hurts—!"

Due to the difference in body weight—or rather, the difference in weight class—naturally, only the boy fell over onto the ground. But he was apparently uninjured. Then shouting with his shrill voice that had yet to undergo puberty, he instantly stood up.

"Ken, are you okay?"

"Haha, you really suck!"

"Shut up!"

The boy was not alone but accompanied by two other companions of similar age. Judging from the way they dressed and behaved, they seemed quite arrogant—commonly encountered delinquents nowadays.

"Oh~ Sorry about that. Are you okay?"

"It really hurts—Don't you look where you're going? Moron! Watch out or I'm gonna kill you!"

The boy continued to shout at Fear, causing her temple to twitch once. But since he was just a brat, Fear managed to maintain considerable self-control.

"Y-You're going a bit far. I'm not the only one at fault. You should have looked ahead while you're walking then you could have dodged—"

"Shut up, foreigner! Stop mouthing Japanese when you're clearly a foreigner! You flatchest!"

"Flatchest... Fu, fufu, fufufu! How bold of you, oh my~ Truly, such bold insolence!"

"Hey, hold on, Fear, he's just a kid!"

Seeing Fear cackle while taking out the Rubik's cube, Haruaki frantically restrained her from behind.

"Ken, now's not the time to be messing about in this place!"

"He's right, we'd better go. After all, we've got our funding already."

"Tsk... Got it, okay!"

Clicking his tongue in displeasure and throwing a final glare, the boys headed off again into the bustle of the festival. Once they were out of sight, only then did Haruaki release Fear.

"Gwah—! I'm so mad! What the heck was with those kids? What's wrong with this country's education!?"

"How rare, but I do agree with your remark this once. If something similar happens again, some educational instruction is needed indeed."

"Hmm—if Kono-san became a teacher... Ohoh. Surely, she'd be a gentle but occasionally scary, glasses-wearing female teacher with a giant bust! W-What perfect use of talent. I'd be willing to pay any amount to take lessons from you!"

"What strange delusions are you having? But then again~ I do agree that she's quite suited to be a teacher."

"Eh, ehehe? Is that so?"

While chatting, the group began walking again.

"Also, speaking of suitable... Kuroe, that fox mask—"

"Does it look good?"

"Well, it's incredibly fitting for your temperament, but I just never thought they'd still sell it nowadays."

"The mask stall nearby is famed for selling weird masks since a long time ago. That guy even sells masks of a yellow electric mouse as well as a certain black and white mouse that's unique in this world."

"That's pretty bad, judging from your description, he'll eventually get arrested..."

Fear's mood gradually improved while the group chatted like this. Indeed, this was a festival, a rare event. Forgetting unpleasant things and having the most fun would be the right choice.

"Say, Haruaki, it's been bothering me for a while."

"Hmm?"

"What's that jangling noise? It's coming from that direction."

"That's a bell, hung above the offering box."

Bell? Offering box? Fear tilted her head in puzzlement. Haruaki wondered where he should start explaining from.

"Well... Since we're here already, let's go over for a look."

"Good idea, we should at least throw in some money as an offering."

The group continued further into the shrine's confines. At the end of the rows of stalls, there was a place that resembled a plaza with a tent that seemed to be the festival's administration headquarters. Since reaching the shrine's main hall required going further up some stone steps, the tent was probably set up here in consideration of that. After passing through the main tent, the crowd was divided. As soon as one started up the stone steps, the surrounding crowd density rapidly decreased. Logically speaking, thanking the gods for bountiful harvests was the original purpose of the festival, but modern people were more driven by practicality.

While listening to the sounds of Fear and the girls' clogs, Haruaki casually mounted the steps, making their way towards the front of the main hall where the crowd was much thinned. Behind them, the festival music could be heard coming from below the steps, sounding a little melancholic.

"Oh~ How quiet."

"Every New Year's first shrine visit, this place gets packed with people. But since it's just the autumn festival right now, that's pretty much as much of a crowd it gets. Hey... Hold on, although I'm only asking you now, do you actually know what kind of place a shrine is?"

"What are you talking about? Stop looking down on me. Isn't it just a place to worship gods? Like a Japanese church or something."

Fear looked up at the solemn main hall then slowly advanced. She stopped in front of the offering box. Looking up at the bell above, she tilted her head and said:

"That thing, it's so huge. But why is there a bell in this kind of place?"

"Eh? Uh—"

"Don't get flustered, Haru. Times like these are for Kono-san the teacher... Please tell me the meaning—"

"I recall that it's for drawing the gods' attention, akin to calling out 'Please look this way—'... Something like that."

"Yes, that's right, that's right. That's what it means. Next, toss in the offering money—donation—and ask the gods to listen to our wishes."

At this moment, Fear looked at Haruaki's face.

"You've never tossed offering money before?"

"That's obvious~"

Answering lightly, Fear sighed softly. She then looked up at the shrine and narrowed her eyes as though looking at something bright. Then she continued in self-mockery:

"Although I don't quite understand things like spirits and gods—Haruaki, do you believe in the existence of gods?"

"I don't really know if gods exist or not, but the way I think about it is like this: if gods really exist, then I hope for their help as much as possible. After all, I don't think tossing in offering money is much of a loss."

"It's like that?"

"—Basically. It's a bit like self-consolation, as well as... a challenge."

At this moment, the offering box rattled. Konoha had tossed in a coin. Then in a slightly unrefined manner, she shook and rang the bell.

"To be frank, I am not a believer. If gods really existed, then I could not have possibly witnessed those scenes over the past few centuries. However, if the gods are willing to listen to our wishes, cursed as we are, I wouldn't mind believing in them a little. In other words, 'allow me to believe in you if you really exist, gods.'"

Then the clanging noise was heard.

"As expected of Kono-san, such an insolent attitude towards the gods—But then again, this nation's choice of gods can be quite half-assed. Even Kono-san's most hated racoon dog^[4] was able to become enshrined as a god. In my view, it's like spending loose change to buy a lottery ticket.

Winning is worth celebrating, of course, but losing isn't much of a loss. So, please please listen to my wish~"

The two girls did as they pleased and said words that could very well bring about divine retribution, then prayed with their eyes closed and palms held together.

Before the bell's ringing stopped, they had already finished making their wish rapidly.

"What wish... did you two make?"

Fear asked.

"That's a secret." "Secret."

Konoha and Kuroe answered simultaneously.

"Anyway, no need to think too much. As part of custom, let me toss in some offering money too... Hey Fear, here you go."

Haruaki took out a coin from his change and prepared to give it to Fear but she shook her head.

"You're not going to toss in an offering? Then forget it."

"I will, but I wanna pay for myself."

Just as Haruaki was going to say "but you didn't bring any money," Fear took out a 500yen coin from her yukata. This was the pocket money Kuroe had given her.

"Kuroe... Is this okay?"

"This is already your money, Ficchi, how you spend it is your freedom... Rather, I'm the one who wants to ask you, is this okay?"

Kuroe was expressionless as usual but her eyes were half-closed in a gentle display.

"To get what I really want—that's why you gave me this coin, right?"

Fear exhaled and extended her fist that was holding the coin over the offering box.

Like a magician performing a ritual, she slowly opened her hand. The coin no longer belonged to her, but to the gods.

Next, Fear shook the rope unnecessarily hard, ringing the bell.

As though shouting—Over here, look carefully, I'm right here.

Then she arrogantly stared up, towards the shaking bell—

"I have a wish that I desire so much that I'm willing to rely on gods whose existence aren't even certain. I have a wish that comes before other things, which is why I'm using this money. Like Cow Tits, judging from the human behavior I've observed continually over time, it's very difficult for me to believe that gods exist... But if you really are present, don't miss this. If you dare skip over my wish accidentally, I won't forgive you!"

...While clapping her palms together.

She closed her eyes and prayed, then murmured:

"...Say, Haruaki, what about you?"

"O-Oh right, let me pray too."

Like Fear, he held his palms together and closed his eyes. Since he was called over by Fear without warning, he had not decided yet what to pray about. Simply recalling what had happened recently, all he could think of were cliched and ordinary things like "let's hope that Fear's wish could come true," "it'll definitely come true~" or "I hope we'll have another chance to visit another festival like this~"

Lost in these thoughts, Haruaki found his eyes opened and hands separated by the time he regained his senses.

Hence, that must have been his prayer.

"Okay, the festival is still going! The mystery of the bell is already resolved!"

"Rather than mystery, it's more like your own ignorance..."

"Shut up, Cow Tits! In any case, I'm hungry again. Let's go, Haruaki, in fact, I saw something that's been nagging at me for a while. What's that thing called the 'sealed apple on a stick' or something!?"

"I know what you're talking about, but that name is quite original."

"By the time the seal is removed, your tongue will be so tired that you won't have the motivation to eat the apple inside—"

While the group chatted about various things as they were about to leave from the front of the main hall—At this moment, they heard noises behind them.

"Arghhhh... Not again! Those damn kids!"

A man's voice caused them to look back. A man, roughly fifty, was peering into the offering box with a scary expression. He was dressed in a white hakama, Japanese split-toed socks and leather-soled sandals. His identity was obvious from his appearance. Absolutely beyond a doubt.

"—Are you an offering thief? To think you're stealing the hard-earned money I tossed in there! Watch me bring divine retribution upon you!"

"Uwah—You're completely wrong! No matter how you look, he's obviously this shrine's Shinto priest!"

Haruaki grabbed Fear's twintails and just barely managed to prevent her from charging... Somehow, he found that catching her like this was more convenient than usual. What a useful hairstyle.

"Unuu, it hurts when you pull like that, shameless brat!"

"Anyway, put that Rubik's cube away first!"

Naturally, Haruaki and Fear's noisy scuffle attracted the man's attention as well. Resting his hand on top of the offering box, he smiled gently and said:

"A foreigner with such fluent Japanese... Welcome to our little shrine. I hope you'll have a good time."

"I am having a good time. On the other hand, what were you yelling noisily about?"

Fear asked, causing the priest to answer with an awkward expression:

"It's quite embarrassing, but it's basically what you mentioned just now. In other words, someone stealing offering money... Although this is just a small shrine, the offerings for the entirety of today can't possibly be this little. There was definitely a thief."

"What did you say!?"

Fear was greatly surprised. Konoha frowned and asked:

"That's quite disastrous... Are you going to call the police?"

"Oh~ That's not necessary. It's also why I'm in such a dilemma, because I have a rough idea who the suspects are."

Staring into the offering box, the priest sighed and answered.

"You know who the suspects are...?"

"I recall you saying 'those damn kids' just now, right?"

"Yes, three delinquents from the neighborhood. I've discovered them a number of times and scolded them severely... But once things cooled off, they always act up again~"

"Mischievous needs to be reined in. As reluctant as one might be to do so, calling the police might be best."

"I do know that letting the police handle it might be more appropriate... But the loss is at most a couple thousand yen. As a priest, asking the police to arrest children who have futures ahead of them, it feels a bit too—But if this keeps happening, perhaps I might be forced to change my mind~ They must learn that even as children, doing bad things will lead to punishment."

Standing there thinking with her arms crossed before her chest, Fear said to the priest who was shaking his head, wondering what to do:

"Say, Mr. Priest, this is just my personal hunch, do the three delinquents you mentioned include a kid called 'Ken'?"

"You know them? That's completely correct."

"I see, so it's them, sure enough... Not really, I don't know them but it's because he crashed into me just now. Even though I was partly at fault, those guys didn't apologize at all. Their attitudes were terrible!"

"Speaking of which, they mentioned something about funding, could that be referring to the offering money?"

"Using stolen money to spend on the festival? That'd really lead to divine retribution, seriously!"

Just as Haruaki muttered, he noticed Fear's shoulder shaking.

"Fufu... Fufufu."

Seeing Fear smiling fearlessly, Haruaki could not help but feel an ominous premonition. Just as expected, Fear began to utter shocking words.

"I get it. I understand completely, Mr. Priest. Why don't you let me handle this? I will bring back the stolen offering money and teach those thieves a little lesson. Also, I'm make them promise they'll never steal offering money ever again!"

"Oh...?"

"Wait, Fear, what on earth are you...?"

"I'm helping people. I must do things 'beneficial to people.' Also—Although my money wasn't stolen, but that's just pure luck. Had the timing been different, perhaps even the money filled with my hopes might have been stolen! So this has made me understand something even more. Stealing money that's infused with people's wishes is completely unacceptable! Those delinquents who have strayed off the proper path must be taken care of!"

Well~ You do have a point indeed... With a reluctant expression in his eyes, Haruaki looked at the priest. The priest responded with the same type of gaze.

"But well... You mentioned teaching them a lesson, but using violence would be a bit..."

"Naturally, how could I possibly use violence against little kids? I will simply persuade them with my sincerity. Like telling them that 'doing this kind of thing will bring about divine retribution' or something like that."

"Oh~ In that case, I'm relieved. But those kids aren't going to listen obediently..."

"Don't worry! We are pros in that area. Just count on us! Okay, since they stole the offering money to go and play, they should still be wandering casually in the surroundings. Let's go!"

"What kind of pro are you? Hey, Fear, wait up!"

Even the sounds of her wooden clogs expressed excitement as Fear rushed forward. Left with no choice, the group could only nod lightly

towards the priest before chasing after her. Following Fear's pace, Haruaki descended the stone steps while saying:

"Fear, you—"

"Any objections? Cow Tits, I wanna hear your opinion too."

"Well... Of course this sort of thing cannot be condoned. In this type of situation where educational instruction is required, I am personally qualified to offer my approval... Provided that they are persuaded without using any violence."

"I agree too—But Mr. Priest is right, who knows if they'll listen to lecturing."

"Then the motion is passed with a majority. Haruaki, are you happy now?"

"Sigh... I get it. I surrender to you lot. But honestly, what are you girls planning? Even if you capture them and give them a lecture, it's pointless if you can't prevent them from doing bad things again in the future."

"I have an idea. Didn't I say 'we are pros'? Of course, I didn't mean pros in lecturing—"

Lips curling into a grin, Fear continued:

"We are pros who can make them understand thoroughly that 'doing bad things will lead to getting cursed.'"

Part 6

—The current location was outside the shrine's confines, behind the path where the stalls were lined up.

The stalls in the distance cast only faint light into this sparse area of mixed forest. This place was completely deserted and was so dark that people would need to stare hard to see one another. Precisely because it was so deserted, adults rarely stepped foot here. In other words, this was considered something of a secret base.

"Damn, there's no octopus in this takoyaki!"

"Haha, serves you right."

"Shut up—"

"Hey Youhei, gimme half of that."

"No way, go buy it yourself. Don't you have money?"

"I'm trying not to splurge. Saving up for a DS here."

"How long is that gonna take? Like the money just now, we only got a thousand yen each or so."

Inane chatter slowly dissipated into the deserted forest. Apart from their noises, all one could hear were the rustling of vegetation. Rustle rustle rustle rustle. Rustle rustle rustle rustle.

Perhaps due to the eerie rustling of leaves, or maybe due to the chilly evening wind, the boys' conversation paused for a few minutes.

"That priest guy must be in a panic now..."

"What, are you scared? There's no evidence anyway. As long as we didn't get caught red-handed, there's no problem."

"So true. I don't know why but last time when we were caught, he didn't inform our parents or the police either."

Rustle rustle rustle rustle, rustle rustle rustle rustle...

"Maybe that guy intends to give us pocket money to spend, so he's turning a blind eye?"

"Hahaha, then he's really a good guy!"

"Just a measly thousand yen for pocket money? Jeez, can't he find a way to make the shrine more popular—"

—Rustle rustle rustle rustle rustle!

The trio's conversation was interrupted again.

They could sense a strange atmosphere in the surroundings. The leaves were rustling too quickly and too loudly as well. Although the wind was blowing outside, this should not happen. The sound was as though someone was deliberately shaking the—

...Rustle rustle. The sound came from behind.

...Rustle rustle rustle rustle. This time, it came from the side.

...Rustle rustle rustle rustle rustle rustle. Then it came from the front.

Judging from the changing positions and the timing and number of the noises, clearly this was produced by someone's will.

"S-Something isn't right."

"W—What!?"

"W-Who's there!? Show yourself now!"

One of the boys shouted. Soon after—

Coming from all directions, as though someone was shaking the forest out of anger, the sound surrounded them. Producing a sense of intimidation, it surrounded them completely.

Waiting with bated breath, was it one of them?

Sounds of trembling footsteps on leaves, was it one of them?

But the time they suddenly realized, standing before them without making a sound—was a petite girl in yukata.

Although the boys wondered "a lost girl?", her appearance would be too bizarre for that.

If she were lost, why was she wearing a retro-style fox mask?

The masked girl remained standing in the dim forest. The unusual situation seemed as though taken from a horror movie. Indeed, the scene was bizarre enough for the boys to describe as "eerie as a horror movie." It was also the only description they could barely understand.

But in the next second, the scene suddenly became "weird" beyond comprehension.

The girl slowly raised both arms.

She took a deep breath—

"Justice~ will~ be~ served~!"

Her black hair extended like countless snakes and started to twitch.

"Well done! She grasped all the main points!"

"No, there's no need to say 'Justice will be served,' right... If you listen to it calmly, it actually sounds kind of cute."

Hiding behind some nearby trees to monitor the situation, Haruaki sighed while covering his face with his hand.

"What are you talking about? It's enough as long as they're scared. The impact produced by Kuroe's hair was amazing as expected. Those boys were quaking in their boots, too afraid to move a single step. Oh, they're already caught?"

"Oh man~ Sorry, boys. Those screams are making me totally uncomfortable..."

This was because Haruaki was hearing three people's worth of pitiful screaming in unison. Just as Fear said, they were caught by Kuroe's extended hair and suspended immobile in midair. Kuroe's hair was also able to be controlled in units of "bunches." For example, her hair was responsible for creating the disturbing scene of shaking trees earlier.

"Gwaaah... Waaah! What? What do you want?"

"Release me! Release me! Release me now! Waaaaah!"

"Yee! Ha, ooh! Guh!"

One of the boys had already started sobbing.

"Uh—I am one of the three goddesses worshiped in this land, Her Augustness of the Sleek Black Hair, descending thus in divine manifestation, having bore witness of ye atrocities. Ye ought to know that stealing offering money is a heinous act, deserving a thousand deaths!"

Hiding to observe the situation just like Haruaki, Konoha shook her head in surprise after hearing Kuroe's self-introduction.

"To think she would call herself a goddess... Besides, what kind of manner of speaking is that?"

"Hmm? She mentioned that she used your way of speaking as a reference."

"Wha? W-When did I... Well, I can't say for certain... But it's definitely not that weird!"

While Fear and Konoha conversed, the punishment continued to take place over on the other side.

"H-H-Heeee... G-Goddess...?"

"Correct. Ye shall receive ye comeuppance—ye shall suffer divine retribution—"

"P-Pull yourself together, Youhei! This is a scam, that's right, it's definitely a scam!"

"Y-You're right, it must be what you say... Right? Right!"

The guy who was about to cry seemed to be almost completely taken in, but the other two were tough customers. Seeing the situation, Fear slowly stood up.

"Kukuku, how stubborn. Well then, I guess it's my turn next."

"Y-You must hold back. Listen to me, you absolutely must hold back."

Fear answered "Got it" and started to put on the mask she had bought from a stall.

Using superhuman powers to teach the boys a lesson through an experience of retribution—But there was one issue with Fear's suggestion. Naturally, the boys could not be allowed to see their faces. Having encountered them once already, Fear's striking silver hair became the greatest challenge. But for some reason, the mask stall turned out unbelievably to sell wrestling masks that covered up the whole head. Wearing that, she really looked like one of those masked heroes from one of those television shows.

"So, I'm off..."

Making a scary breathing noise, wearing a realistic-looking skull mask, Fear went on her way. In terms of invoking horror, it could be considered a success. But rather concerning was the fact that it did not suit the original intent of conveying divine retribution.

"Eeeeeeeek! Ken, a-another one has arrived!"

"D-Don't be afraid! Isn't it that one, the guy called Gasha Skull! So friggin' lame to wear a superhero mask, the one inside must be human!"

After producing laughter that seemed like was coming from some kind of deep space ninja, Fear quietly took out the Rubik's cube. Then as though manifesting out of thin air, she transformed it into a vicious-looking drill.

"Kukuku... I am one of the three goddesses... Her Augustness Too Adorable! Don't get the wrong idea, the reason why I wear this mask is because your eyeballs will be scorched and destroyed by the sight of we gods. That would be too much, even though you deserve to be punished as offering thieves... yeah... Ufufufufu! Calling it an alternative plan might sound strange, but a specially prepared punishment is already ready for you. Look forward to it, offering thieves! Shuko—!"

Next came a series of metallic noises. In order to scare them, Fear had transformed the drill into a massive hatchet that looked like it could even chop a bear in half. This worked along the same principles as Kuroe's hair to produce phenomena that could not be explained by common sense.

"Ahhh... I give... up... I'm s-sorry, please stop this. I'm willing to apologize..."

"Waaaaah... I'm gonna die—I... really will die..."

"It's a scam! This is a scam——!"

Only one of the boys continued to struggle despite being bound by Kuroe's hair, the one called Ken. Although his eyes glimmered with tears, it felt like he was struggling desperately to distract himself from his own fear.

Even when Fear waved the hatchet in front of face, his attitude did not change. Even when a supermassive spiked club sank heavily into the ground, he remained unswayed. Fear shrugged lightly and threw a glance towards Haruaki's group.

"Sigh... It's my turn now? But now that things have developed to this point, I'm really reluctant to do this..."

"J-Just find a way to make them promise never to steal offering money again. I can't help in any way, I'm really sorry...!"

After hearing Haruaki's sincere words, Konoha smiled as though giving up on various things and put on her mask. Because she could not wear any mask that was too cute, neither could she repeat Fear or Kuroe's choices, almost left without any choice, the mask she wore was—

"U-Umm, I am also one of the three goddesses—Her Augustness the Gentle and Beautiful. Uh—Listen carefully, you are forbidden from wrongdoings. So do not commit any crimes ever again..."

Hers was the kind of butterfly mask often seen in masquerade balls in movies.

"..."

The boy called Ken seemed to be frozen in time as he looked at the final goddess in astonishment.

Rather than terrifying, Konoha's appearance was—

One might say, quite perverse.

As cold wind blew across the mixed forest, the boy called Ken suddenly made a commotion again. As though brought back to life, he regained his liveliness.

"Hey Youhei and Kouta! Wake up now! The least scary one is here!"

"Eh...?"

"W-What...?"

Haruaki went "ahhh~" and clutched his head. No good, the butterfly mask was definitely unsuitable—

However, Ken's next words changed the situation.

...Although it was unclear whether it was a good or bad change.

"Look, guys, that's definitely~ not some kind of god! What, it's just Masked Lady D-Cup!"

"D-Cup...!"

Watching from the side, Haruaki suddenly felt a severe chill rush along his spine.

Instantly, everything changed in appearance, devoured whole by a dark aura. Ahhh~ Was this reality or fantasy? A slightly warm breeze shook branches ominously. Perhaps bats or birds, some kind of creature made strange screeches, flapped their wings and flew. Chaotic sounds of wings

flapping began to surround the forest in a clamor. Rustling in the grass suggested that even snakes were escaping out of survival instinct, from this place that could be understood as hell?

Next, at the very center of the strangeness, coming from a certain masked girl was—

The sound of a nearby tree crashing down.

Of course, Konoha was not holding anything in her hand. She simply swung a karate chop.

Even from a distance, Haruaki was breaking out in goosebumps, frightened by her demonic aura. The boys could not possibly be unaware. This time, they really dared not speak simply stared at Konoha.

"Fufu... Happy little children... One suddenly wanteth to play a game with ye..."

Saying that softly, she slowly, slowly approached the boys. The boy named Ken simply shuddered, his teeth chattering. Fear shook her head from side to side silently while Kuroe held her palms together lightly, still keeping the boys tied up. This was far too inauspicious.

"Of course, ye shall not be killed. Though ye shall not be killed—"

At some point, Konoha had started holding a wooden branch in her hand. Lifting it before Ken's eyes, as though showing off to him, she held it between her index and middle fingers, then severed the branch with a snip.

Still keeping her hand in scissors-like pose, she held Ken's earlobe between her fingers—

"I shall not repeat myself again. Thou shalt not steal offering money ever again. Shouldst thou fail to adhere to this promise, thy fate... Thou ought to know, dost thou?"

While listening to the screams of the stubborn boy who was finally conquered, Haruaki closed his eyes.

Sorry. Please forgive us in many ways.

Also, the most important thing.

If Konoha were to become a teacher, there were still many things that needed to be set right first.

Part 7

As soon as the unharmed boys were released, they ran for their lives while crying. Haruaki only hoped that they did not form some kind of unpleasant mental trauma... Like freezing in fear whenever they saw a butterfly mask again.

Haruaki's group brought back the offering money to return to the priest and reported that the "boys promised they won't steal offering money again." The priest felt very surprised and thanked them with a sigh of relief. He even said "You've really helped me a lot. Would you like some tea?" However, Haruaki's group firmly refused the invitation and went back to the festival.

"Gwah—I'm dead tired..."

"Good job. Although it turned out a little different from what I expected, the result is pretty alright."

"This is what they call 'taking pleasure in helping others.' Eh, Kono-san, what's the matter?"

"...Please don't talk to me. Right now, I'm in the middle of hating myself..."

Walking unsteadily, Konoha was covering her face with one hand while sighing deeply.

"It's about time to go home. We've already visited everything worth visiting."

"What!? The festival is only held for this one day! It's very possible that we might have missed some kind of festival-exclusive tasty food or some stall, so we can't go home yet! Yo!"

"So heavy!"

Fear suddenly climbed onto Haruaki. Just as he crouched down slightly, unable to withstand the weight, Fear used the opportunity to sit on his shoulders.

"Again? What the heck is with you?"

"A higher position makes it easier to enjoy the scenery. Also, this will allow me to discover stalls that I haven't visited yet. After all, it's not every day that festivals are held, I have to experience it thoroughly! Let's go, Haruaki! Take joy in exploring the unknown!"

"Sigh... I don't have the strength to convince you. Okay, one final round."

Hence, Haruaki allowed Fear to sit on his shoulders while she kept hitting his head, then walked towards the stalls ahead of them. Since the festival's busiest time had passed, the crowd was gradually disappearing. Fear was completely uninterested in iron pan cleaning at the red bean cake stall or the deflation of unsold balloons at the balloon stall. She simply kept scratching and pulling Haruaki's hair as though recalling something on occasion and seemed very quiet.

"Fear, you've already seen everything, right? Fear... Fear?"

"..."

Just at that moment, Haruaki suddenly felt a weight against the back of his head. The water balloon originally strung on Fear's fingers also slid down before Haruaki's eyes.

"...Zzz—"

Fear had fallen asleep. Sitting on his shoulders, it was as though she was hugging his head.

Perhaps she had exhausted her energy from over excitement. Haruaki smiled wryly while sighing.

"...Let's head home, Konoha and Kuroe."

"Good idea."

"Understood—"

The trio walked down the stone steps they had taken on their arrival. The only thing different this time was that Fear had become quiet.

"Snore... Snore..."

"Her face looks so happy, it's a bit displeasing. I want to try doing the same thing too."

"After all, it's her first time at a festival. It can't be helped—The first time this girl visited school, just the fact that there were so many people made her extremely touched already."

"But it really was quite fun this time. Quite worth the visit."

Walking beside Haruaki, Kuroe remarked.

"In that case, please don't go traveling without giving any notice. Traveling is fine, but at least tell me your intended itinerary."

"Fair enough. But I don't think I'll be traveling for now... Now that there's Ficchi at home, it's becoming less and less boring."

Haruaki felt a soft feeling on his left hand. Kuroe was holding hands with him on her own accord. Haruaki looked down towards her—

"Since festivals only happen once in a while, I'd like to contribute to the mood slightly."

"Contribute to the mood?"

"That's right. With Ficchi sitting on your shoulders, Haru, you look like the master of the house. I was thinking that on the way home, I'd help you nurture more of a mood fitting for the master of the house."

"I don't really get what you mean. Besides, hearing the phrase, 'master of the house,' to me it just sounds like 'how tough, you've got more work ahead of you'..."

Even so, Haruaki did not feel like shaking Kuroe's hand off. No sooner had he walked a few more steps, this time, he also felt a soft sensation on his right hand. As Konoha's eyes drifted with a suspicious gaze, she said:

"Umm—I don't like being left out, so... It's not like I feel like a certain role is missing just because Fear-san and Kuroe-san are playing children while you're playing the father, Haruaki-kun. How should I put this? Uh—It's a feeling, yes, a feeling."

"...? I don't quite understand what you're saying either..."

"S-Simply stated, it's that! Wearing clogs makes it difficult to walk, so it feels a little worrying. All you need to do is understand that meaning!"

Put that way, it was not hard to understand... Although Haruaki felt that Konoha should be quite used to clogs. But then again, walking at night was a completely different matter. It could not be helped.

Hence, with Fear on his shoulders and holding hands with the other two girls, Haruaki made his way home.

The trio did not speak along the way. The steady rhythm of footsteps reminded Haruaki of everything that had happened throughout the entire day, those memories that made him smile naturally.

For example, there was the yukata fashion show before leaving the house, Fear and the girls happily exploring the festival while making a lot of noise, the punishment for the boys that felt slightly overboard... Also, the way Fear looked when praying with her eyes closed in front of the offering box. Haruaki felt that the entire day's deepest impression and the one that he should cherish most was the sight of Fear, cursed as she was, praying and making a wish. Haruaki recalled the various scenes.

And right now, filling his heart was a very warm sense of certainty, the same as what he felt when he saw that scene.

Ahhh~ Fear's wish probably could come true, right? For her, that wish was both simple and resolute enough that she would gamble everything upon it without hesitation. And precisely due to knowing how noble that wish was, she decided to severely punish that group of thieving children who stole offering money that was filled with wishes. Most definitely.



The sentiment of protecting even other people's wishes—So long as she continues to carry that kindness, there was probably nothing to worry about. That was precisely what Fear needed to realize her wish.

"Muunya... Takoyaki, so hot, round all over, so tasty... Mufufu."

Hearing dream talk coming from the pleasant weight against his head, Haruaki moved his shoulders slightly.

Behind him, the festival music, the bustling crowds—All that was part of the festival atmosphere, gradually receding into the distance as Haruaki's group walked away. At this moment, he felt an inexplicable sense of solitude yet at the same time, a kind of peace like when one was about to fall asleep.

Hence, Fear was absolutely correct. Haruaki wished nothing for her but to enjoy a happy and sweet dream along the way home.

Entwined around Fear's fingers on a string, the water balloon quivered and shook as though reluctant to leave the festival.

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



スクール☆ウォーズ
～人形原黒絵は退屈しない～



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 4 - School☆Wars ~Ningyohara Kuroe Is Not Bored~

Part 1

A few days after the cultural festival ended, it was an ordinary morning.

"Then we're off to school—"

Time to head to school. Yachi Haruaki casually stepped out of the entryway as usual. Naturally, his group of cohabitants also followed behind him.

"I'm going to school—Oh, today's weather is really nice."

"Yawn... I'm off to school—"

Konoha swayed her braids while Fear yawned. Their voices could be heard coming from the entryway. Usually, someone would respond "Take care" from within the house, but today, their remarks were just a customary ritual made to an empty house. Instead—

"Yes, let's get going—Next, my long and dangerous strolling route will begin..."

"Clearly, it's neither long nor dangerous. On the other hand, you're leaving the house with us? It feels like it's been a while since the last time we all left together in the morning."

"Really?"

Always sleepy-eyed, Kuroe spoke as she skipped out of the entryway. Normally, Kuroe would hang out at home until it was almost time for her beauty parlor, the Dan-no-ura, to open for business. But occasionally, she would leave early like today. Making use of her stroll, she would walk together with Haruaki's group along the route to school before heading off to the shopping street.

However, since everyone was leaving the house, the home's doors and windows had to be locked, naturally. After making sure the entryway and the main door was locked, they set off. Everyone walked along the usual path to school.

Everything went as usual without any differences, but before long, Haruaki noticed something. It felt like the pedestrians on the street were staring at them from time to time, even more than usual.

(Hmm... I guess we're even more conspicuous than usual... Isn't that so?)

Haruaki sneaked a peek behind him. After some thought, he instantly knew that people's stares were justified. Although he was already used to it—First of all, Konoha possessed an extremely striking and voluptuous figure, one that did not seem like a high school student's. And of course, Fear attracted attention through her appearance. Furthermore, joining them today was an especially petite and sleepy-eyed prepubescent girl, dressed in casual clothing with her long, black hair swaying. Whether each girl's personal characteristics or considered collectively as a group, it was impossible not to draw people's attention.

Just at this moment, Haruaki heard the three girls converse.

"Oh right, by the way, Kuroe, I've always wanted to ask you this question. Did you ever study in school?"

"Oh, nope. After all, I'm already used to the human world, so I opened up a shop first—But I have been to school before. It was back when Haru was a middle schooler."

"...I don't get what you mean."

"What do you mean, you went to middle school before... You simply donned a uniform and sneaked in just for fun, didn't you? And you even caused a lot of trouble for others."

"That's right, that's right, causing others trouble is not good—But I remember you coming along with me, Kono-san."

"Hmm... Umm, indeed that's right... B-But how should I put this? I was overcome with worry about Haruaki-kun's situation in school, so... That's why I did it, out of my sense of duty as his legal guardian!"

Haruaki sighed as he heard Konoha's hastily fabricated excuse. He recalled those memories unintentionally... Back then, the school was really plunged into chaos.

"Hmm. Middle school. I'm a little envious of that."

"Really? After graduating from middle school, there's high school. I don't think you need to envy that as a high school student, Ficchi. Instead, I should be envying you—"

"Oh~ Why's that?"

"Because it's high school, which is on a completely different level from middle school in all meanings of the word. Ahhh~ High school, a secret garden where boys and girls ascend to the stage of adulthood—Surely adult events are taking place in there day and night. After school in the classroom, behind the school building, inside the gym storage...!"

"Adult events and the gym storage...? I don't really get it."

The subject seemed to be getting weird. Haruaki looked back while he walked and saw Kuroe bringing her lips to Fear's ear and chattering.

"Then I'll only give some hints... Mats... Jumping ropes... And also, vaulting boxes... Whisper whisper..."

"K-Kuroe-san! What bizarre things are you recklessly teaching her? Isn't this far too indecent!?"

Flushed red in the face, Konoha grabbed Kuroe's collar. Still sleepy-eyed, Kuroe remarked "I'm getting scolded by Kono-san—" For some reason, Haruaki got the impression that she was enjoying herself. Meanwhile, Fear pouted and complained:

"Hey Cow Tits! Stop interfering! I didn't get to hear anything at all!"

"It's better that you don't!"

"Hey, you girls, we're about to reach school. Also, there will be more students gradually, so please, don't do anything so embarrassing..."

Finally, Haruaki could not bear to watch any longer. Just as he narrowed his eyes at the three girls and warned them—

"What are you talking about? The only one embarrassing herself is this girl. More specifically, showing off those twisted lumps of meat is very embarrassing!"

"T-Twisted? You're finally starting the personal attacks? This alone I cannot let slide! Listen to me very carefully. I am very confident in my shape and figure...!"

The two girls started an even more embarrassing argument. Since this was business as usual, Haruaki pretended to be strangers with them and continued on his way. His destination, the school building had already entered into view.

"I'm so jealous of you, Haru. With two girls to accompany you to school, you definitely won't feel bored at all, right? I knew it, high school also seems quite fun—"

Walking beside him imperceptibly, Kuroe looked up and threw him a glance as she spoke. Normally, she always wore a blank expression but right now, she was smiling faintly.

"...Sometimes, I do wonder about 'living a peaceful and boring life'..."

Haruaki slumped his shoulders helplessly and could only answer in an exhausted voice.

"Then I'll be on my way—"

"Yes~ Today is a full day of classes. You need to put in effort at work too."

"You must work hard, Kuroe-san."

"Yeah, bye—"

Waving her hand, Kuroe watched as Haruaki's group entered the school building.

Then she was left alone at the school gates. She could still hear students chattering on their way to school, "Wow~ That petite little girl is so adorable—" Kuroe originally planned to act even cuter and perhaps receive a candy for her efforts, but regrettably, it was almost time for her to get to the shopping street in preparation for opening her shop. Just as she turned around reluctantly, a student couple brushed past her.

"By the way, did you finish the Ancient Japanese handout?"

"Not yet, because last night's television was too good. Let me copy off you later, okay?"

"You leave me no choice... Don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Awesome~ That's why I love you. You're always so gentle."

"J-Jeez~ Don't go saying that openly in this kind of place..."

This couple could probably be aptly described as "harmonious." Holding hands, they looked at each other and smiled. The boy had a head of long, brown hair, his uniform was unkempt while there were many silver accessories on his fingers and arms. The schoolbag in his hand also had quite a few crosses and doll key chains hanging off it. Overall, he had a lot of random bling but it did not change the fact that he was handsome. On the other hand, the girl had medium-length hair and glasses without any outstanding characteristics. Compared to him, she was quite ordinary.

"...!"

Kuroe halted, her eyes following the couple as they moved. No, to be more precise, she was following the boy with her gaze.

She could not tear her eyes off him, completely captivated.

A certain impulse surged in her heart.

The instant she saw the other party, she became extremely concerned.

She wanted to talk to him. Ahhh, however—Even she found this quite strange herself. Perhaps she was just imagining things. No, nevertheless, the feeling flowing out of her heart was—

While her heart was stuck in turmoil, the couple had already walked into the school building. As soon as the boy went out of sight, Kuroe closed her eyes and sighed lightly.

"What should I do...?"

After asking herself, she slowly opened her eyes. By then, she had already found the answer.

Were she to ignore it—If she ignored this impulse, surely...

She was going to regret it.

"..."

Kuroe once again turned her back to the school gates and started walking without changing her destination of the shopping street.

But as soon as she reached her shop, what she needed to do had changed.

Instead of preparing to open up...

She felt she must first put up a "Temporarily Closed for Today" notice.

Part 2

It was currently the break after the first period. Haruaki and the others were chatting near their seats as usual. Kana had just gone to the washroom so the people present were Fear, Taizou and Kirika. They were currently discussing the topic of "was the world history teacher, Konishi-sensei, wearing a wig?" Naturally, the most enthusiastic participant was Taizou, the one who had raised the issue.

"Definitely without a doubt. No matter what, it's too unnatural. The way the hair sticks up completely goes against the laws of physics!"

"Umuu umuu. I totally agree with you, Taizou."

"Discussing other people's physical characteristics like this isn't very appropriate... How absolutely ridiculous. But just for the record, let me offer my view as well... Is that a hair transplant?"

"Ohoh~ Immediately after you say it's an inappropriate discussion, even you are chiming in, Class Rep."

"I-I get bothered by certain things too, it can't be helped! Basically, it's his hairline! That hairline!"

Just at that moment, Kana returned to the classroom, holding Kuroe by the hand.

"I've returned—what what, a wig? You're talking about wigs? Oh how could you leave me out, Kana the wig researcher, that'd really bother me—There's no need for me to hide it. I'm the hidden mastermind who orchestrated the vice-principal's coming out at the full school assembly, resulting in the 'Diffuse Reflection Incident of May' that caused his popularity to explode—"

"Oh~ You're back? So you research wigs? I'm hearing it for the first time. So..."

Hearing Kana talk in her lively tone of voice, Haruaki turned to look at her, but the scene before his eyes filled his mind with extreme dissonance.

Struck with puzzlement, Haruaki turned to look again, as though twisting his neck off.

"Then I came at the perfect moment. You can count on me on anything related to hair... By these observant eyes of mine, I shall discern if the hair is real or fake with a single glance—"

"Kuroe? W-Why are you here?"

Holding her by the hand, Kana said "I ran into her on my way back from the washroom—" Then she started twirling Kuroe around as though they were ball dancing. Kuroe displayed her usual eyes of sleepiness while nodding and spinning. Naturally, she was wearing the school uniform, probably the smallest size available... Nevertheless, it was still not an exact fit for Kuroe's petite physique and the size was still slightly larger.

"Seriously, what are you doing here? And what's with that uniform? Did you ask Sovereignty to lend you one?"

"No, I did consider it, but the size probably won't fit. This came from the laundry shopkeeper's collection."

"Hold it right there, you people. None of that matters. The important thing is why are you at school—Ugh!?"

The classmates had discovered Kuroe's presence by now and were gathering around their seats. Whether boys or girls, all of them were saying with brightly glimmering eyes:

"Wow~ Wow~! She's that girl, right? The one who cheered for us during the sports festival! So cute~!"

"That's right, I was trying to find out about her back then! She's Haruaki's distant relative, currently staying at his house. Despite how she looks, she's actually a twenty-year-old hairstylist! Calling her a girl would be a bit too rude!"

"Were there flyers earlier? It's that shop. Uh—Remember? I even went there for a hair cut last month—"

"Remember that my family runs a chiropractic massage shop at the shopping street? Only when talking about her does my stubborn old dad make eyes like a fanboy who keeps emphasizing how cute she is. It's creepy, super creepy...!"

"Okay~ Everybody line up, line up first. One question at a time! But I hope you won't demand autographs!"

"Taizou, you're really in the way! I can't see her beautiful appearance!"

Haruaki could not help but recall the first time Fear came to school... Nothing was more noisy than this kind of affair.

In any case, he needed to find out what was happening exactly. Thinking "what a ruckus~", Haruaki approached the leisurely Kuroe, intending to question her properly. However, Kuroe grabbed his hand instead and said:

"Well~ I need to explain to you first so let's go somewhere quiet."

"It's great that you'll explain it to me, hey... Don't drag me..."

"Ficchi, I leave the rest to you! Answer whatever questions they have, even about us taking baths together!"

"Hey, how do expect me to handle things if you just toss me a hot potato like that!? Take me with you—Uwah!"

"Taking baths? Fear-chan, you must explain in detail about that!"

"Boys, back off, all of you! Anyway, please tell us about how you care for your beautiful hair!"

Kuroe was probably using Fear as a distraction. When the classmates all swarmed over Fear, Kuroe used the chance to squirm through the crowd and leave the classroom. Held by the hand, Haruaki had no choice but to follow.

Kuroe ran along the corridor and brought them to a corner of the school building. Haruaki was thinking she wanted to talk here but she ended up just looking around.

"Hmm~ Let's go in."

"Wha? Go in where... H-Hey!"

The place where Kuroe forcefully shoved Haruaki was a cleaning equipment closet at the end of the hallway. Due to the suddenness of it, Haruaki was unable to resist. His view was instantly plunged into darkness then he heard the steel door grating as it closed shut. It was very cramped inside and Haruaki had one foot in a bucket while he could feel a broom handle against his back. Then standing in front of him was Kuroe in school

uniform. Her petite and soft body was pressed tightly against him. A fragrance, strong enough to ward off the smell of wipe cloths permeating this space, was exuding from her hair that was stimulating the tip of his nose all this time.

"Hey, what on earth do you want!?"

"Okay okay, calm down. Essentially, I'm an outsider, so I don't really want to be seen by teachers."

"Th-Then don't come to school in the first place...! Back to the issue, why are you here? What about work?"

"The shop is taking a break today. Because there's something more important... I need you to help me with something, Haru."

Wrapped around Haruaki's waist, Kuroe's arms exerted slightly more force. Her tone of voice sounded serious. Hence, Haruaki understood that Kuroe did not come to school simply for fun.

Frowning mildly, Haruaki looked down in the dark space to see Kuroe's head.

"...I'll listen to what you have to say first. What could actually need my help and be more important than work?"

"I want to... find... someone... Someone from this school. I know what he looks like but not his name."

"Looking for someone huh... Then why do you want to find him?"

Kuroe paused for a few seconds as though pondering something.

Then she slowly looked up and Haruaki heard—

"Uh... Love at first sight?"

What a shocking statement. It was quite concerning how she tilted her head slightly and even used an interrogative subtly. But no matter what, the statement was very shocking indeed.

The two of them stared at each other in silence.

From outside the cleaning equipment closet, the bell rang to signal the end of the break.

At this moment, the question surfacing in Haruaki's mind was "You're not going to ask me to skip class and help you right now, are you?" However, he did not say it out loud. Since he already knew the answer, there was no need to.

...Because Kuroe's slender arms were wrapped tightly around Haruaki's waist as though implying "don't even think of leaving unless you agree to my request."

Part 3

Fear was thinking to herself: completely unbelievable.

During second period, the English teacher was teaching the class. Skilled in English to begin with, Fear basically had nothing to learn from class. While tapping her notebook impatiently with her mechanical pencil, Fear shifted her gaze.

The neighboring seat was still empty. Haruaki—as well as Kuroe who had appeared in school uniform for some reason—had disappeared during break without returning. Where had the two of them run off to? What were they doing? All mysteries.

(No, wait a sec?)

She suddenly stopped the mechanical pencil and recalled the conversation on the way to school.

(Kuroe... That's right, she seems to be quite attracted to high school life. As for why she's attracted, I don't really know but she mentioned something about adult events. Also judging from Cow Tits' uptight look, it seems to involve shameless things. In other words—)

The computer in her brain began to crank out an answer.

Kuroe and Haruaki together.

A rare visit to high school. A wish to experience adult events in the high school context.

Two people playing shameless games together?

"...No way!"

Fear knocked her chair over and stood up all at once. No way, that was unacceptable. After all, shamelessness was shamelessness. She could not turn a blind eye, even for Kuroe. Currently, the two of them must be cooped up somewhere like the gym storage or something...

(Ohoh... Mats and jumping ropes, and... Vaulting boxes, even...!)

The two of them were definitely practicing front handsprings, right? They were even laughing while counting their double jumps, right? Ahhh~ Even if it's the vaulting box, the two of them were surely trying out some kind of unimaginable jumping maneuver. That behavior was definitely beyond her comprehension, yet carrying scary and shameless implications...!

At this moment, Fear noticed that all eyes were drawn to her in the classroom. Oh right, class was still in progress.

"Excuse me... Cubrick-san? I-Is there anything wrong...? Umm, for someone like you who is native to an English speaking country, the teacher's pronunciation might be off... Uh—"

Seeing the English teacher speaking timidly, Fear decided she was backed into a corner. She had no choice but to steel her heart and try out that method. Namely, the great trick of "skipping class by pretending to be ill"!

Even if it was her first time skipping class, there was nothing to be afraid of. Although she had never gotten sick, that was not an issue either. She had witnessed many students heading to the infirmary halfway through a period, so all she needed to do was imitate them.

Hence, she began to search her memories, recalling the way girl classmates left the room during lessons. The most common illness was the one called a flu, right? And they would mention something about a fever... Then say they felt dizzy and hoped the teacher could let them rest in the infirmary and that they could make their way over on their own.

Quoting them directly might be too obvious, so she probably needed to edit the excuse a bit, like making subtle changes to the phrasing and maybe even the sequence as well. Hmm... Fever definitely means that the body feels hot—

Thinking "Okay!", Fear nodded.

Then in a voice loud enough to resound throughout the entire classroom, she yelled out her symptoms in a lively and forceful manner.

"Teacher! Umm... I am currently feeling hot all over, how should I put it? I feel very agitated inside. I think I need to rest on a bed in the infirmary, may I?"

Everyone in the classroom stared at her in dumbfounded astonishment. Perhaps due to excessive editing, perhaps some part became unnatural after all...

However, seeing that the teacher did not say anything, he was probably going to help smooth things out and explain that Fear still had not grasped Japanese completely.

Hence, of course, the teacher allowed her to rest at the infirmary. However, Fear felt that the teacher was making a stiff face, exuding an aura of surrendering that said "too lazy to make a snide response." She was definitely overthinking things.

Feigning illness so successfully on her first try, Fear left the classroom, greatly pleased with herself.

She even thought that her acting skills were amazing.

In order to search for Kuroe and Haruaki, Fear began to walk through the empty corridors while lessons were in progress. Immediately, she ran into a familiar face but instead of the people she was looking for, it was a girl whom she did not quite wish to meet.

"Muu!"

"Ah!"

Coming out from the girls' washroom, Konoha frowned and glared at Fear. Of course, not to be outdone, Fear glared back at her.

"What are you doing? It's currently class time."

"I should say the same for you, right?"

"I am simply coming out of the washroom, so there's nothing unaccountable about it."

"Yeah, then hurry and return to the classroom."

"Unfortunately, my class is having a self-study session, so a brief chat is well within acceptable bounds. On the other hand, your class should be having a lesson taught by a teacher, right?"

"Muu..."

Fear's eyes seemed to say "could it be that she figured out I'm pretending to be ill?" That would be bad. Instantly, she desperately racked her brain—Rather than escalating the argument and risk getting taken back to the classroom, she decided it would be better to recruit her as an accomplice. Kuroe and Haruaki might not be in the gym storage, so having another person to search would help. Although Fear hated getting help from Konoha, she decided to tolerate her as a necessary cost.

"Wait, Cow Tits, listen to me. Actually..."

Fear started explaining to Konoha about Kuroe's visit to school, interlaced with her own imaginings.

One minute later—

Konoha stared in wide-eyed astonishment from behind her glasses, collapsing into a sitting position on the floor.

"A-Ahhhh! In the gym storage... Using the vaulting box... Opening and closing...!"

Her face went pale. Even though Fear could hear her murmuring, she was unable to make out what Konoha was imagining. In any case, it must have been shameless stuff.

"I-I must stay calm... No matter what, that kind of behavior should... Ahhh~ That's right. Normally speaking, it's an impossible possibility... But considering Kuroe-san, if Kuroe-san is the one who came, let's prepare for the worst before taking action... No, however...!"

"I don't know what you're thinking about, but anyway, I've told you what happened. The only thing I've got to add is this: 'in fact, Kuroe and Haruaki are skipping class together'—This undeniable truth. What you do is up to you, bye."

Judging from the way things looked, Konoha was not going to bring her back to the classroom. Hence, Fear walked past her and began to move through the corridor. Along the empty corridor, the footsteps of her indoor shoes could be heard.

The same kind of sound immediately chased after her from behind.

Part 4

"On to the next class. Is he there? If not—"

"...P-Please, could you try not to move..."

Feeling the weight on his shoulders—or rather, the soft sensation of thighs against his cheeks—Haruaki groaned softly.

They were in the corridor. Although he had no choice but to search through the students in the classrooms, opening doors to peep was a bit dangerous. Any amount of noise would probably draw the attention of the entire class—Hence, Haruaki was forced to have Kuroe ride on his shoulders like this. In this manner, Kuroe was able to peer inside the classroom through the ventilation window above. Haruaki kept getting the feeling that he had once experienced the same hell between thighs during the sports festival as well.

But there were still differences compared to last time. During the sports festival, Kuroe was in a cheerleading outfit with bloomers underneath but right now, she was in uniform. Fluttering over his head currently was probably her skirt hem? Then against the back of his head was—No way, stop thinking about it any further.

Think of something else. Of course, there was Kuroe's purpose this time.

She mentioned love at first sight. On further thought, Haruaki had never heard Kuroe talk about her love life at all. Jokes were aplenty—But accompanied by concrete action like this? It was really the first time.

But the first thing that came to Haruaki's mind was that there were many problems. Kuroe's situation was unlike a normal human's. Furthermore, her appearance was like this.

But at the same time, perhaps there was no actual problem. Putting her origins aside, Kuroe was currently no different from human. Putting appearance aside, her social status was that of a twenty-year-old hairstylist, a member of the workforce. Haruaki thought to himself: "Oh~ right, I don't have the right to make any objections." If she wanted to pursue someone romantically, he had to respect her decision. Probably.

Even so, Haruaki still kept feeling uncomfortable in his heart. It resembled unrest or anxiety, an emotion that also felt like fear. Then there was a kind of... loneliness. He did not know why. No idea at all.

But back to the subject at hand, was Kuroe serious?

Haruaki looked up, trying to check out her expression. But in that instant—

"Wah... Haru, you're such a perv. You're the one who shouldn't move recklessly."

"Uwah, sorry!"

When looking up, due to changing the angle of the back of his head, it caused a certain spot to enter an awkward situation. Frantically, he looked down at his feet.

"F-Found him yet?"

"Hmm—Not this class either, let's try the next one."

Kuroe was impossible to read as usual, simply doing whatever she wanted with a blank expression. That was why Haruaki did not dare to ask her. Despite the questions he had, he did not voice them. What did she intend to do after finding the boy? Confess to him? Then—

While he pondered over these matters, a voice came from the side.

"Hmm? Hey, what are you two doing? It's currently class time!"

A middle aged teacher was over there, probably passing by coincidentally. He was the world history teacher for Haruaki's class—namely, the very Konishi-sensei they had been talking about during the break. His characteristic was that head of unnatural hair.

"C-Crap! What should we do?"

"We can't be caught here, so running away is the only option."

"J-Just running off like this? But I don't have time to put you down, whatever...!"

Hence, Haruaki ran with Kuroe still sitting on his shoulders. Konishi-sensei yelled "Hey, stop" and pursued. That meant Haruaki had no choice but to speed up. Kuroe was very light so carrying her was not much of a burden—But being too light was itself a problem. The recoil from his

running was making Kuroe bob up and down slightly on his shoulders and even caused her skirt to cover up his head.

"Ehhhh? I can't see anymore!"

"Wow, Haru is inside my skirt... Lemme say this again: you're a perv, Haru."

"Now's not the time for saying that, okay!?"

"Relax, even if you can't see ahead, I can still guide you. This is the time for me to display my AI command skills honed from simulation games. Anyway, just keep charging straight and you'll be okay—"

"Rather than waiting for your guidance, wouldn't it be faster if you just pushed your skirt away!?"

"What did you say? Are you actually asking me to lift up my skirt? That's very embarrassing, I... But... If you insist, Haru... I don't mind..."

"I can tell you're very happy! You're absolutely enjoying this, aren't you?"

Despite arguing back and forth, Haruaki managed to pull her skirt up while in the process of running. Upon thinking further, Haruaki realized that given it was Kuroe, she was not likely to fall down even if he did not hold onto her legs. Then the annoying skirt fell down a couple times again, but he had no choice but to keep running as hard as he could. Just at that moment—

"By the way, I forgot to mention something very important."

"W-What is it?"

Haruaki asked without stopping but he could tell from the shift in center of gravity that Kuroe was turning her body. Most likely, she was looking at Konishi-sensei who was pursuing behind.

Then Kuroe announced in a serious tone of voice.

"The correct answer is... 'A hair transplant!'"

"I honestly think that's none of my business!"

Finally managing to evade Konishi-sensei's pursuit (along with his hair transplant), they found themselves confronted with the next break.

A boy was buying canned juice at the vending machine near the school entrance. Just when he was picking up the can from the machine, he suddenly sensed something and looked back. Standing there was a petite girl whose physique put her at elementary or middle school age.

She did not say anything. Biting her finger as a child would, she stared straight at him.

The student groaned.

"U-Umm... I-If you wanna use the vending machine, go ahead. No one's using it now."

"..."

The girl shook her head forcefully and eyed the can of juice in his hand with a gaze of desire. The boy groaned again.

"R-Right, by the way, I happen to have extra change to spend! I don't really wanna drink anything, but lemme buy another can for someone else to drink as well! Coffee... No wait, orange juice, I'd better buy orange juice! Okay, it's out. Then... Yes, here you go! Don't be shy, Onii-chan just happens to have change he wants to get rid of!"

Clearly the girl was in a high school uniform, but for some reason, the boy spoke as though he were facing a young child. Then after he shoved a can of juice to her, the girl accepted with surprise and looked up timidly at him—Then smiled.

"Thank you, Onii-chan."

"Guha! I-I-I... I feel like... my life has... meaning now...!"

Hand pressed on his chest, the boy staggered away. While waving goodbye, the girl watched him leave and added the can to a whole line of drinks hidden behind the shoe cabinets.

"Muu... How incredible. I can get juice simply by staring at people. It's already five so far."

"H-Hey—! Stop doing something so terrible!"

To think she'd do something so underhanded while I was finding a relatively deserted washroom to go to.

Hearing Haruaki, Kuroe simply pouted and said:

"Because... Even when I said no, the first person still shoved it to me. Refusing people is also rude, right? After all, since I can't drink them all, why don't you pick a flavor you'd like to drink, Haru?"

Haruaki sighed. Since Kuroe had not blackmailed them proactively, it could not be helped... Right? That said, Haruaki still felt like he had a ton of lecturing for her.

"As much as it pains me... But by this point, there's no way to return the drinks to people, so I'll just take one. I'm tired from all the running."

"I didn't think that guy with the hair transplant would be so stubborn—I'll take this can."

While conversing as they took a short break, the two began to drink. When they finished their juice, the bell rang again for the next period. Hence, Haruaki threw their empty cans into the trash while stuffing the left over drinks in his pockets. Just as he was about to set off to continue Kuroe's manhunt operation—

They appeared.

"Fuffuffu..."

"Uffuffufufu..."

"Eek! Fear and... Konoha... W-What's up?"

Perhaps he was imagining things but the two girls seemed to be filled with rage. Although they were wearing smiles on their faces, it was actually quite scary.

"We finally found you two..."

"Yeah, we searched for a long time, such as in the gym storage or behind the school building... But to think you guys would be holding a juice party at the school entrance, we totally overlooked this possibility. You both seem to be enjoying yourselves, ufufu..."

"Sure enough, you guys are skipping class for a date within school."

"How envious... Rather, it's unforgivable..."

Haruaki did not quite get what they were saying. However, he gradually realized how dangerous the current situation was.

"H-Hold on, you two, there must be some kind of misunderstanding. Skipping class is not right, but there's a reason for it, okay!?"

"...Haru, I'm sorry. I don't know what will happen if you let Kono-san and Ficchi find out. Anyway, my wish is for the reason to be kept secret. Because I don't want to make too big of a deal out of the matter."

フィアとこのはが あらわれた！



はるあきは おびえている
くろえは こまっている



Kuroe tugged at his sleeve as she spoke. Backed into a corner, Haruaki helplessly thought "in that case, how should I explain things?" This resulted in—

"What are you two whispering secretly about!? Damn shameless brat, step right on out! I shall correct your mind!"

"Kuroe-san, you too! If you're just here to play, it's fine, but I can't believe you're having a date with Haruaki-kun in school! It's absolutely too indecent. I cannot bear the sight of it any longer!"

"Wah—Anyway, let's run away first, Haru."

"I think running away will actually make things worse instead."

In order to escape from Fear and Konoha who were rushing at them, Haruaki and Kuroe turned around and ran outdoors through the school entrance. Although they were still wearing indoor shoes, there was no time to be concerned about that. Fear and Konoha did not care either. Those two girls were serious. If I get caught, who knows how they'll torment me...! Simply the thought of that was enough to make Haruaki shake uncontrollably.

Haruaki and Kuroe ran as though they were following the edge of the school building. Although they were not discovered by other people like just now when the teacher chased after them, this also meant that they could not ask anyone for help. But even if there were someone to ask, Fear and Konoha would definitely beat them up without any hesitation.

"It's no good, I think they're going to catch up immediately! Say, Kuroe, I think we should give up and just explain things clearly to them..."

"Save that for the final resort. Haru, hold on tight!"

Kuroe suddenly stopped and forced Haruaki's arm to wrap around her waist. Then she looked upwards.

"Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»!"

"D-Do you really need to go so far?"

Kuroe's hair rustled as it slithered and extended upwards. Then entangling the fencing at the top of the school building high above, the hair pulled Haruaki and her upwards like an elevator. Haruaki also recall experiencing something similar just a few days ago.

"Tsk, good grief! Next up is that, right? In other words, a date on the roof?"

"Speaking of the roof, the blue sky comes to mind. Speaking of the blue sky, there's afternoon naps. Speaking of afternoon naps... There's sleeping on someone's arm as a pillow? I get it. It stands to reason that the roof is also used for indecent behavior! Absolutely forbidden!"

Since they could not escape by running, there was no choice but to make use of vertical mobility. Leaving Fear and Konoha's voices down below, Haruaki and Kuroe reached the roof successfully. But their relief only lasted but an instant.

"Considering those two, it's very likely that they'll push themselves to climb all the way up. We'd better get moving and continue with the search."

"Hmm, how did things come to this...?"

Just as Haruaki stumbled his way onto the roof and muttered, Kuroe spoke quietly:

"I'm really... sorry for causing you trouble."

Judging from Kuroe's profile, she was not lying. Her eyes were narrowed greatly as though she really felt apologetic. Haruaki could get a real sense that she was actually serious. Despite knowing it was troublesome, she did not intend to stop searching for the boy of her thoughts... If this was not being serious, then what would be serious? Haruaki could still feel turmoil in his heart but—If that was her sincere wish, then he had no right to make any irresponsible comments. That was what Haruaki believed.

Hence, he smiled lightly and caressed Kuroe's head.

"We're on the same boat already. By this point, I've no choice but to accompany you to the very end... We'll flee as hard as we can and find that guy you must find no matter what."

"...Yes."

Kuroe smiled demurely.

And said "Thank you."

However, reality was not that simple. Despite having mental resolve, it did not mean that things would proceed smoothly. In other words, a couple dozen minutes later, Haruaki and Kuroe were once again being chased by the hunting hounds—one silver-haired, one glasses-wearing. Furthermore, perhaps due to the anxiety caused by their unsuccessful chase, the two girls were getting more and more serious.

The thought of instantly apologizing "sorry for skipping class" had occurred to Haruaki, but by this point, twenty-twenty hindsight was of no help. Currently, they were running along the first years' corridor again.

At this time, the bell rang for the conclusion of the third period. Haruaki was hoping that having greater crowds might make it easier to escape, but this thought only lasted for an instant. In her seriousness, Fear did something crazy and unexpected. Taking a deep breath, she then yelled:

"Wake up, everyone from Year 1 Class 3! Listen to me! Haruaki is skipping class and intends to do shameless things with Kuroe in school—!"

"W-What—? Absolutely unforgivable!"

Instantly, all her classmates rushed out of the classroom in a jumble. To Haruaki, they were like a summoned herd of demonic beasts. Naturally, their loyalty towards their summoner was at maximum—All of them were fully fired up. Logically speaking, their contact with Kuroe was too brief to have such a strong response, but right now, everyone was treating her as a princess for whom they would lay down their lives to rescue, preparing seriously to apprehend the demon king (Haruaki) who had kidnapped Kuroe. Give me a break, okay?

"Damn you, Haruaki, keeping the goods all to yourself!"

"The reward for catching him is a school date with Kuroe-san? I'll gladly do it in exchange for my life!"

"What must I do to add the option of calling me 'Onii-chan' as well?"

"You guys, why are you so serious! Also, don't go changing other people's words to suit your own personal desires!"

There was no time to turn around. Also, Fear and Konoha were currently approaching. Haruaki had no choice but to break through the blockade directly. Lost in reckless abandon, Haruaki picked up Kuroe's petite body and squeezed through the arms of the classmates blocking the corridor.

Naturally, there continued to be pursuers after he went past the blockade, hence he still had to continue moving.

"Guha, what a pain...!"

"Haru, do you wanna find a place to hide first?"

"Good idea, uh... Right now, the only place I can think of is there!"

Obstructed by the members of the class, Fear and Konoha ended up getting slowed down instead. Making full use of this fortunate turn of events, Haruaki and Kuroe continued running and charged into the staff block. Panting as they ran up the stairs, they prioritized looking out for pursuers in the surroundings then ran into a certain room on the top floor. This was the very familiar office of the superintendent.

"...Eh? May I help you?"

"Wow—Kuroe-chan? In a school uniform as well, could it be you're transferring, you're transferring here as a student?"

Inside were two ladies—the superintendent's secretary Hyoujou Zenon and her assistant Sovereignty the maid. The absence of the weird superintendent was perfectly commonplace.

Haruaki threw a sideways glance at Kuroe who was casually raising her hand to greet "Hi—We're here to play—" while talking to the occupants of the room:

"Uh—I can't explain the reason! But right now, Fear and Konoha are chasing us. Could you let us hide here for a bit? Please!"

"Well... But Fear-sama and Konoha-sama are also important friends of the superintendent. Perhaps they might complain afterwards, so... At least let me in on the reason so that I may make a correct decision."

"Hmm—Actually, it's not like who's right or wrong here, rather, it's just caused by an unfortunate chance encounter."

Kuroe muttered while Sovereignty, dressed as a maid, walked briskly over to Zenon and spoke her ear:

"Excuse me, Zenon-san, I have an idea. What was discovered in the storage closet... Ask her... to do that... in exchange..."

"—!"

Originally expressionless, Zenon's eyes suddenly lit up like a robot that was fully charged. Naturally, that was just an analogy. But undoubtedly, something definitely had entered her on a mental level.

"Then please head over to the room next door and leave the rest to us."

"I-I don't really get it, but thank you to you both...!"

Currently, there was no time for doubting why Sovereignty and Zenon had suddenly changed their minds. Next, Haruaki and Kuroe moved through the side door to the room next to the office, which could be considered the secretary's room. Inside was a large steel desk, a closet that appeared to hold clothes for changing, as well as a sink providing water for brewing tea. As for the gigantic elephant plushie sitting on the desk, Haruaki decided it would be better to pretend that he never saw it.

In any case, as soon as Haruaki and Kuroe entered that room, the door to the neighboring superintendent's office opened noisily.

"Excuse us!"

"...Welcome, Fear-sama and Konoha-sama. May I help you?"

"H-Hello—"

"Oh, Zenon and Sovereignty, I've got something to ask you."

"Did Haruaki-kun and Kuroe-san come here? We are currently looking for them."

Naturally, these were the voices of Fear and Konoha. Haruaki and Kuroe pressed their ears against the door to listen.

"No... I have not seen them today. Since you are looking for them, should Yachi-sama and Kuroe-sama visit, do I need to contact you?"

"Ooh, muu. Really? Then if they come here, could you call this girl's cellphone to contact us? However, please do it secretly without letting them know."

"The chances of them escaping here are very high... However, those two should also know that we'll come here in search of them. Perhaps we fell into their trap instead."

"Damn it, how could they be allowed to escape!? Let's go, Cow Tits!"

Then the two girls rushed out of the office in a flurry of footsteps. It looked like they were deceived successfully. Just as Haruaki was sighing and thinking "what a pain," he opened the door and saw Sovereignty.

"Ehehe—We succeeded!"

"Y-Yeah. Thanks Sovereignty."

"After all, you're both my friends, Haruaki-kun and Kuroe-chan. I feel sorry about deceiving Fear-chan and Konoha-chan, but it's fine since I'm able to help. But convincing Zenon-san requires a price... Okay, Haruaki-kun, shoo, get out of here. Kuroe-chan, stay here, stay here."

"W-What? A price?"

Sovereignty simply said "don't ask so much" and forced Haruaki back into the superintendent's office. Although he had no idea what was going on, he felt he should still thank Zenon for helping to deceive Fear and Konoha. Surveying the room—

"U-Umm... Zenon-san?"

"There is nothing more wonderful than the safety of you two. Please wait here until the storm passes."

"O-Okay... That's fine, but..."

"...Is there a problem?"

Rather than problem, Haruaki would say that her behavior was very suspicious. For some reason, Zenon was kneeling on one knee and had taken a digital camera out from somewhere, pointing it at the door leading to the adjacent room with flawless posture. Like a photographer who did not wish to miss a decisive moment... Or rather, the level of intensity had probably reached that of a photographer who did not wish to miss the instant the president was assassinated.

In any case, Haruaki sat down on the sofa to wait for Kuroe and Sovereignty's return.

A few minutes later.

"I-It's done... Zenon-san!"

"I've no idea what's going on, but to think I was asked to change—"

Pushed out from behind by Sovereignty, Kuroe was dressed in a maid outfit. A frilled skirt, fashionable apron as well as a pure white headress contrasting with her black hair. The look suited her quite well. Sovereignty smiled while forcing Kuroe into cosplay, still in her usual sleepy-eyed demeanor. Naturally, Zenon was furious pressing the shutter button of her camera the moment Kuroe appeared. She kept taking all sorts of photos, including closeups, changing angles, high angles and low angles. For some reason, Kuroe did not seem annoyed and even starting changing poses on her own during the latter half of the photo shoot.

"U-Umm...?"

Haruaki watched in amazement. Sovereignty walked over lightly.

"Ehehe, because Zenon-san knows that there's a maid outfit in the closet. And she says she absolutely refuses to miss out on Kuroe-chan's maid look. Rather, I want to see it very much myself! This is basically the price for our help!"

"So that's what you two were discussing...? But if doing something trivial like this can buy us personal safety, it's quite cheap... I guess?"

If they headed out right now, Fear and Konoha could still be wandering in the area, so killing some time was necessary. Besides, Kuroe looked quite happy, so there was probably no problem—Haruaki decided to think that.

"Hmm—Kuroe-chan really looks so cute! I really wish you could start working alongside me from today onwards!"

"...If the beauty parlor ever goes out of business, please hire her."

"How rude, how could it go out of business so easily, Haru... Correction, it will never go out of business~ Dear master—"

"You're dying to try it out, right? Like today, you closed up the shop on your own."

As Kuroe answered while making poses, Haruaki was suddenly struck by a question. Indeed, Kuroe had deliberately closed her shop in order to come over to school. She was currently looking for her love at first sight. Due to her forcefulness, Haruaki had failed to realize until now... Did he really need to find the person so urgently? Even if feelings of love cannot be suppressed no matter what, was it really necessary to search so urgently—?

However, his questions were interrupted by Zenon suddenly standing up.

"Oh, what's the matter? Zenon-san, have you completely captured Kuroe-chan's cuteness with the camera? You must show me later!"

"Sovereignty, you have misunderstood something. My purpose in taking so many photos does not lie in capturing her cuteness—Indeed. This will be used as recruitment materials in the future should greater manpower be needed and another assistant has to be hired. Naturally, you must move into the shot as well, to produce an image of how 'senior colleagues even provide careful instruction to novices.' This is what it's about. This photo shoot is undertaken purely on grounds of business necessity rather than any intent to capture cuteness."



Haruaki felt that Zenon's glimmering eyes were actually revealing her true thoughts of "apart from 'adorable,' how else would you describe two maids together?" in direct opposition to what she was saying aloud. However, pretending not to notice probably counted as a form of kindness.

"Thus, we now proceed to photographing you two together. You come over here as well."

"O-Okay~ Please be gentle..."

Clearly, this photo shoot was still going to continue for a while longer.

Part 6

The fourth period began—and so did the manhunt—but still, Haruaki and Kuroe had yet to locate their target. The girls who had gotten the wrong idea were also relentless. Since they were relentless, shaking them off completely was impossible.

Finally—Haruaki and Kuroe were backed into a corner by the two obsessed and highly resentful girls.

On a roof with no place to run. Even if they used Kuroe's hair to move vertically, it was meaningless unless they moved up rather than down to escape, because the girls would surely jump down directly.

"A-Actually, please listen properly to our explanation. You'll understand!"

"What are you talking about... What do you want us to understand? Regarding the two of you getting into secret acts of intimacy... I'd like to do the same too, but I hold back—Rather, school is a place meant for studying industriously...!"

Hopeless, Konoha had already turned into a glasses-wearing demon. In that case, Haruaki had no choice but to place his hopes in the other girl.

"Say, Fear, you should know me! I'm really not doing anything against my conscience—"

"Die!"

A simple word was enough to show that she did not listen to anything at all. This was further accompanied by the clicking sounds of the Rubik's cube being turned. No matter what barbaric act she was going to commit,

there were no witnesses here... This thought alone was enough to make Haruaki feel bone-chilling fear.

The two girls took a step forward. At this moment, the lunch bell rang, sounding like a bell to announce the beginning of an execution. Timing just as the bell finished ringing, Kuroe spoke up.

"Hmm— ...Originally, I was thinking 'if possible, I'd like to handle it alone.' But by this point, I guess it's fine to reveal the matter."

"You're referring to?"

"Uh—I'm actually looking for someone. I simply asked Haru to help me out."

"I don't believe it. Then why didn't you say so from the very start?"

Fear and Konoha did not lower their guard at all, still slowly closing in. Was it too late to explain...? Had they explained at the start, perhaps the girls would have believed. But explaining after fleeing desperately for so long, there was probably little credibility, right? Just as Haruaki agonized over what to do next—

"Seriously... What are you all doing!?"

"Uh hi, Class Rep."

Opening the metal gate to the roof, Kirika appeared, her ponytail swaying in the wind as she narrowed her eyes at the group.

"Skipping lessons starting from second period... As the class representative, I can't ignore that. How absolutely ridiculous. Even if Kuroe-kun came to school to play... What on earth are you all thinking? Yachi, Fear-kun and Konoha-kun!"

"K-Kirika, this does, umm—have reasons."

"Th-That's right. Uh—They're secretly having a date in school..."

Confronted by Kirika who was not directly related, Fear and Konoha probably could not legitimately muster excessive aggression in attitude. They simply hunched their shoulders slightly and murmured what appeared to be excuses. However, Kirika could not possibly accept things so easily, hence she proceeded to glare at Haruaki and the others. Haruaki simply stood there, unsure of what to do.

"Sigh... That's right, with a third party here, perhaps they could listen calmly to our explanation. I will try my best to explain. Kono-san and Ficchi, listen carefully to me."

Kuroe seemed to think that this was a good opportunity. Hence, she began to tell Fear and the rest what she had already told Haruaki earlier. L-Love at first sight? Fear, Konoha and Kirika looked at one another in surprise. Then they eyed Haruaki with skepticism. Naturally, all he could do was respond "that's what seems to be going on."

"Say, Kuroe, why didn't you say so earlier!?"

"Well... Because there's no real proof... No, umm, I find it embarrassing. But it can't be helped now that I've said it already. Will you all help me in the search?"

"Umm... I don't really mind. After all, it's Kuroe-san, love at first sight... huh...?"

Not entirely convinced, Konoha tilted her head in puzzlement. Standing on the side, Kirika sighed greatly in astonishment and said:

"How absolutely ridiculous... There's no need to search during class time, right? However, since you only know his face, perhaps that's one method... But do you have any other clues?"

"Even if you want clues, I only passed by him once. But he was wearing a silver ring."

"Although that's against school rules, there are a couple of students like that. But most likely, they'll take their rings off during class... Did the students call each other by name or mention their class? At least we'll know which year they are."

"They didn't mention that~ What they chatted about was... Hmm?"

At this moment, Kuroe suddenly cocked her head as though recalling something.

After a while...

"Right, they talked about... Whether they had finished the Ancient Japanese handout or something...?"

Kirika frowned and sighed even more than just now.

"How troubling—In that case, rather than searching the classes one by one while lessons are in progress, why don't we do something else first?"

"What do you mean, Class Rep?"

"...If I were doing it, I'd start with the office of the Japanese language teachers."

Haruaki and Kuroe looked at each other. After a while, Kuroe clapped her hands together in realization. Haruaki figured it out at the same time.

There was no need at all to search every class one by one like just now.

Since the couple had mentioned an Ancient Japanese handout, naturally...

The person sought by Kuroe must be limited to the classes that had to hand in a handout for Ancient Japanese today.

Part 7

Arriving at the office for Japanese language teachers, they found the necessary information. Although the teachers stared at them in surprise, since this was not information that could be used maliciously, they readily provided it—Very fortunately, there was only one second-year class that needed to turn in their Ancient Japanese handout today. Since none of the afternoon classes needed to turn in handouts, it was quite easy to narrow down the target's class. Next, Haruaki went with Fear and the girls to that classroom. As a side note, Kirika said "I've no interest in intervening in other people's love affairs. You guys better be back for the afternoon classes." Having said that, she had returned to her own class before the group made their way to the staff office.

After arriving at the second-year class, Kuroe peeked inside. However, the person she sought was apparently not there. As a result, Haruaki asked a student in that class. After confirming based on Kuroe's description of the boy's physique, hairstyle and accessories, etc—

"Oh, if you're looking for that guy, he usually eats lunch with his girlfriend in the courtyard."

"Okay, is that so? Thank you... Eh, girlfriend!?"

The instant they left the boy who answered their questions, Kuroe had already started dashing off. Haruaki frantically chased after her.

"Hold on a sec, I didn't hear you say anything about him having a girlfriend!?"

"Doesn't that make the situation terrible, Kuroe-san?"

"It's not terrible at all—Relax, don't worry."

Although there was obviously a huge problem, Kuroe did not slow down. Without any choice, the rest followed her, changing into outdoor shoes before heading to the courtyard.

Kuroe kept staring at a bench, standing totally still. The boy sitting there was probably the one she was searching for. His appearance was just as she described: long, brown hair, accessories all over him, very handsome, however...

"Uh—May I offer my personal opinion? Summed up in a single description, I think he's very frivolous."

"I don't really understand that saying, but anyway, he looks kind of weak. He also seems to be using perfume... Kuroe, you like this kind of boy?"

"H-Hey, you two with the comments! Anyway, that's the guy, right? Kuroe."

"It's him alright. The schoolbag is here too, thank goodness—Well then, I'll handle the rest from now on. You guys can watch but don't interfere."

"Well~ We have no intention of interfering either."

Next, Kuroe slowly walked forward while Haruaki's group followed while maintaining a certain distance. This could be easily attributed to natural curiosity. After all, having been manipulated to this point, there were many things that they wished to clear up.

Finally, Haruaki's group closed in and stopped just barely far enough away to listen to the voices at the bench. Kuroe continued to swiftly approach the two people there.

"...Hello there."

"Huh?"

"Are you Yokkun's friend? A first year... But you're really petite."

"No, I don't know this girl."

The couple was looking at each other in puzzlement. Kuroe approached the bench even closer.

Her blank eyes were focused on a certain target without blinking. Naturally, this should be the face of the skirt-chasing boy whom she fell in love with at first sight—

But no.

It was the schoolbag.

His schoolbag was on the bench. Kuroe was staring at the schoolbag, which was just as covered with accessories as he was, with many key chains and a jumbled mess of ornaments.

Then she reached out.

And plucked a doll key chain from amidst the ornaments—

"H-Hey! What are you doing? Give it back!"

Kuroe ignored the boy and simply asked in a calm voice:

"This doll was handmade, right? Who made it?"

"W-What?"

"Answer me. This is very important."

"Well... This girl made it. She gave it to me as a present, so I can't let you have it—"

"Really? Sure enough, just as I expected."

Kuroe shifted her gaze. For some reason, the ordinary-looking female student, sitting beside the boy, was so scared that she kept shaking. She was staring straight at the ground as though afraid of Kuroe's cold gaze.

"...In that case, I should talk to you. Could you come over to me for a bit?"

The girl remained silent for quite a while but finally nodded and acquiesced. Legs trembling, she stood up from the bench—

"Hey, wait up! What do you intend to do to her? Say, give that key chain back! It's an important present—"

Originally about to turn away, Kuroe giggled expressionlessly.

"...There's no need to say something so insincere. I don't believe that you cherish this doll at all. No matter how you try to hide it, I can tell."

Even to observers such as Haruaki's group—

These were terrifyingly—

Cold words.

Consequently, the boy immediately sat down on the bench in shock. Kuroe led the girl to the back of the school building. Maintaining a certain distance, Haruaki's group followed.

What a completely unexpected development. Only totally incomprehensible things were happening.

However, one thing was very clear and definite.

The reason why Kuroe was searching for the boy—

Was definitely not due to love at first sight.

Behind the school building, where there was no one else, Kuroe and the girl were facing off, separated by a subtle distance. Haruaki's group were peeking while hiding in the shadows of the school building.

The girl simply bowed her head in silence. Kuroe gazed at her with the usual, blank eyes. Finally, she slowly held up the doll key chain and said languidly:

"So, why did you... put a curse on this doll?"

Part 8

One could easily surmise why Fear and Konoha were silent while suppressing their surprise. Haruaki was crouching while the other two were on top of him, peering behind the school building, hence their faces were not visible. In Haruaki's view was the girl, her shoulders trembling in fear after hearing what Kuroe said. But at this moment, she looked up and said with a stiff smile:

"W-What nonsense are you talking about? I don't understand a word you're saying."

"You understand. This doll carries malice. Put bluntly, it is gradually getting cursed."

"S-So what!? I already said I don't know! Although I don't understand what's going on, I only came over to hear what you had to say. Totally incomprehensible, I'm leaving... Also, return that to me! It's just a doll, a gift I gave to my boyfriend. It's only a doll, okay!?"

"No way. Then excuse me."

In the end, Kuroe reached out with her free hand that was not holding the doll—

And twisted the doll's head off.

The nondescript superdeformed doll's head was taken off. Kuroe then stuck her fingertips into the head and dug out the cotton inside. After removing a substantial amount of cotton, Kuroe pulled out something from the cotton, pinched between her fingers.

A hair.

"Why would a hair be hidden in an ordinary doll?"

"U-Uhh...."

Kuroe's calm voice caused the girl to bow her head again.

Kuroe waited for her to answer. So did Haruaki and company.

Then after a long silence, almost enough to make them forget what her voice was like, the girl finally spoke.

"...Two-timing..."

"Hmm?"

"Because, I know... He's two-timing..."

She continued in broken speech.

Just as everyone could see, the boy was very popular with the girls. Even knowing he was two-timing, the girl did not dare confront him for fear of getting dumped. Hence, she pretended to be unaware on the surface. Even so, it grew unbearable as the number of instances increased. Her heart was filled with indignance, rage, hatred—hating her rivals and also

hating her unfaithful boyfriend. Despite loving him in her heart, she also hated him.

"So... I was trying it out for fun... I made... that. On the net, there are rumors about how to make... your significant other... incompatible with rivals... Small magic and the like."

"That's right—It'd be okay if it's something specific like romantic incompatibility, but this thing is different. Uh—I can be considered something like a psychic so I know very well. If months or even years were to pass and you continued to invoke a curse through this doll... Well, I wouldn't be surprised if your boyfriend ends up in a car crash."

"N-No way... It's just... small magic only..."

"Even if it's just small magic, your malice—That curse is real. And it really will harm others. However, it's up to you whether you believe me or not."

"..."

"Anyway, I noticed this doll because of that curse. Since it drew my attention, I couldn't turn a blind eye to it. That's why I did this. And also to satisfy my personal curiosity. I have no intention of forcing you to do anything. However, I just have one tiny request..."

Her voice was very gentle.

And sounded a little lonely as well.

"—I wish you won't use dolls as tools for cursing ever again. I also hope you'll never make a cursed doll again."

"But, it's because... Then what should I do...?"

The girl's voice was also trembling.

"That's a problem for you to think yourself. You can maintain the status quo and continue pretending to be unaware. It's also okay if you force him to make a choice or if you simply forget about that skirt-chaser completely. Although throughout the process, you might find yourself suffering a great deal."

Kuroe stepped forward lightly. One step, two steps. To her side.

Then reaching out with her small hands—

She hugged the trembling girl tightly.

"—If it feels painful, then feel free to cry. Hugging a doll, vent the resentment in your heart and cry to your heart's content. If dolls were used for that purpose... Then it will definitely... have no complaints."

"...Guh... Eee... This sucks, why am I crying..."

"There there, until your heart calms down, just stay like this."

Kuroe patted her lightly on the back while hugging her with gentleness.

The doll that used to be unable to hug back as a human, after enduring cold curses, finally obtained this ability—

Because of the warm embrace of humans.

Part 9

The girl sniffled while leaving the area behind the school building. Haruaki and his group walked out from the corner in embarrassment. Fear scratched her head shyly while speaking to Kuroe who was standing calmly:

"Kuroe... Umm, sorry. Looks like I jumped to conclusions."

"Don't say that. It's my fault for running like mad without explaining anything. Don't worry about it."

"By the way, why did you lie about love at first sight?"

Spun in circles by that lie, Haruaki asked. Kuroe shrugged lightly and said:

"Because when I saw the doll in the morning, what I felt was only on the level of 'maybe?' Unless I held it in my hand to confirm, there was no real evidence. If I was mistaken, it'd be very embarrassing, right?"

"Even then, you don't need to make that kind of lie, right... It's also okay if you don't have real evidence. Also, if you explained to us from the start, we might have assisted you in various ways."

"You're right~ But the problem is that it wouldn't be good to make too big a deal out of it... It's also impossible to rule out the possibility that Ficchi or Kono-san might punish the child because of your strict stance against cursing others."

"I-I won't do that."

"That's right. No matter what, that level of violence should not be allowed... Probably."

Fear groaned with her eyes narrowed while Konoha shook her head in exhaustion.

"Oh, more accurately, the doll hasn't even reached the level of almost acquiring a curse. Miraculously, I knew roughly that the doll was beginning to be cursed, that's that. I also told that child that no harm will manifest as long as she doesn't continue cursing."

"...Even so, you still felt very concerned, right?"

Kuroe nodded yes. Her eyes drifted afar as she continued:

"Especially because I believe that dolls are very easy to get cursed. Although the probability is not high, or it might happen in the distant future, but if it were to become like me... Wouldn't the doll be very pitiful?"

"O-Okay now~ Don't make such a grave expression, Kuroe. You did something good! Or maybe I should apologize to you again, sorry for chasing you like that! Although I think that Cow Tits should get most of the blame!"

"I-Isn't it all because of what you said first!? Something about Haruaki-kun and Kuroe-san definitely having a shameless date in school, hence we must chase them down and the like! It's totally unfair for you to push the blame like this!"

"What are you talking about? I'll curse you!"

Fear and Konoha were arguing as usual. Kuroe also smiled happily. Then she glanced at Haruaki whose narrowed eyes were watching the girls argue.

"...By the way, Haru, back when I said I fell in love with someone at first sight, honestly, how did you feel inside?"

"Huh?"

"I really wanna know—Were you shocked?"

"W-Why would I be shocked... I think... it's... great..."

Haruaki stammered and did not speak clearly. In actual fact, he had no idea himself.

If possible, he wished to remain silent but Kuroe's gaze did not move away. Hence, Haruaki gave up and sighed.

"Oh... How should I put this? Back in middle school, Taizou once mentioned how one of his cousins was getting married. Then his eyes drifted into the distance while he said: 'If I visit my relatives for summer, maybe she won't play with me anymore?' For some reason, I think I may be able to understand now how Taizou felt back then..."

"Haru, your Japanese is very weird."

Kuroe smiled. Although he did not know whether she was satisfied with his answer or not, in any case, she did not press the issue any further.

"An older cousin... Hmm, there's that too, perhaps it's not a bad type of relationship..."

Softly, Kuroe murmured something incomprehensible. Then she turned her gaze lightly towards Fear and Konoha. The two girls were still arguing.

"First of all, you're the one who told me that a date in school was shameless!"

"No, although that's correct, the problem does not lie there!"

"Oh~ You're talking about correctness now? Then tell me, how shameless is the gym storage? Using what and in what kind of shameless manner are games played? After thinking calmly, I don't see anything shameless about front handsprings or jumping ropes. If there are other ways to play, you tell me."

"W-Well... I can't say it out in a place like this...!"

"Oh dear, looks like I should take some responsibility and act as an arbitrator here—"

Prior to this, Kuroe was showing seriousness slightly beyond her usual level. But she proceeded to revert to her usual self. Sleepy-eyed, emotionless, unreadable—

"Okay okay, you are both correct, so don't fight anymore. A date in school is indeed an adult's erotic game. While searching for that person, I was having a date with Haru in school, that's also the truth."

Fear and Konoha made eyes saying "Oh really? as they dangerous gazes pierced Haruaki.

"W-Wait a sec, why do I have no recollection of this!? I don't remember any date!?"

"Muu, Haru, you've forgotten all those fun times...? Like the secret hug in the closet, the heart-thumping ride on your shoulders, belong only to the two of us... For me, each and every memory was wonderful. Oh right, my skirt was even covering your head. You even said then: 'Hehehe, why don't you lift it up yourself?'"

"Your explanation is barely acceptable until the middle, but I definitely did not say those final words!"

"Also, later on... I remember a conversation where you said you were uninterested in hair."

"Hair? You mean Konishi-sensei's hair, right?"

Haruaki could feel an ominous presence approaching rapidly. For some reason, scenes from horror films were surfacing in his mind. Like a great white shark in the water or xenomorphs under the floorboards. What was the next scene about to happen?

"There you go again, Kuroe-san. Those things could not possibly have happened, hahaha."

"That's right, no matter how shameless Haruaki is, he can't possibly do something so shameless in school, right? Yes, I believe in Haruaki."

However, Konoha and Fear's responses were completely opposite to what Haruaki expected. Haruaki groaned "wow" and felt a bit touched. Indeed, Fear and Konoha did believe in him on occasion. They did not simply misunderstand all the time and pursue matters to the very end—

However, in the end...

Only those particular responses ran counter to his expectations.

"Uh... I'm happy that you're saying that, but why is Konoha holding my shoulder down so tightly? Also, Fear, why are you swiveling that Rubik's cube...?"

"That's putting it wrongly~ This is just a massage from me as an apology to you."

"There happens to be no one here. Of course, it's got nothing to do with the shameless brat. Even though I haven't been getting enough exercise lately, I'm just speaking from the perspective of starting some batting exercises."

"That was a feint just now? You girls are using 'a prank among friends' to make me relax, then using the time lag to make Jaws appear? Is that it?"

"Oh dear~ I see you're a bit confused~ Everyone should chat while calming yourselves down... Ufufu."

"I know what Jaws refer to, it's that shark movie, right? Okay, let's talk about sharks. Speaking of sharks, then you can't leave out those terrifying teeth. As it so happens, I also have a saw called «The Teeth»... Kukukuku."

Holding onto Haruaki's shoulder, Konoha's hand was clenching and relaxing repeatedly. Meanwhile, Fear was pressing the Rubik's cube against Haruaki's forehead while playing a song with the clicking noises of plastic.

Then Kuroe, the one who had sown the seeds for the entire commotion—

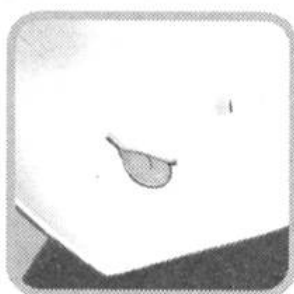
"Wow~ High school really is fun as expected... It's completely different from home and it's great. I should come again to play another day."

While saying that, she leisurely watched by herself as usual while those seeds of hers germinated.

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



上野錐霞を懐かせる方法



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 5 - How to Tame Ueno Kirika

Part 1

The heavy rain poured nonstop.

A young housewife stood in front of a mailbox, holding an umbrella in her left hand while carrying in her right one of those large envelopes for containing documents.

Reaching out lightly with her right hand, she was just about to insert the envelope into the mailbox. However—She suddenly halted in her movements. The rainwater splashing off her umbrella soon drenched her hand and the envelope.

She was hesitating, with various thoughts such as "Should I really do this?" "Is this really appropriate?".

But that hesitation instantly vanished.

She recalled the "thing" inside the envelope—those nightmarish days caused by it, as well as the rare opportunity that finally arrived to free herself of that nightmare.

Indeed, this thing was very scary. Extremely dangerous and evil. She could not bear keeping it by her side for another moment.

Of course, she had tried to discard it many times in the past but never succeeded. For some reason, she could never let go in the final moment, because it probably imposed its will forcibly on the owner to control her thoughts. This was really too scary.

That feeling still existed right now but not to an unbearable extent. Perhaps this was because her current act was not "abandoning" it but "handing it over" to someone else. No problem. All she needed to do was reach forward a few more centimeters, toss this into the mailbox, and she would be free from all that suffering.

She did not know if this envelope might actually reach the destination. According to what she had heard, even the address was quite vague. Besides, whether the receiver was actually an appropriate place to send this over, the rumor was unsubstantiated. Were it an ordinary family, she would be simply pushing someone else into the nightmare.

Nevertheless, it was very clear that her own troubles would be over once she released this hand. The return address on the back was randomly scribbled. Even if it failed to reach the receiver, it could not possibly return to the sender. Hence, hence—

"..Sorry..."

She repeated as she let go. From the mailbox came a small thud.

But before she could hear that sound, the woman had already turned around and left the mailbox.

Bowing her head slightly, she jogged away.

...As though trying to escape from her own crime.

Ultimately, this would end up as the impetus for a disaster that later rocked the Yachi residence.

Part 2

During a perfectly ordinary trip home from school...

"Hmm—Really? If that's the case, it's okay... Oh, I'm just on my way home after some grocery shopping. I'll be home in a little while... Sorry, could you wait for me briefly? Yeah, then see you in a bit."

Haruaki ended the call on his cellphone. Swinging the supermarket shopping bags forcefully while she walked, Fear immediately glanced at Haruaki and asked:

"Who was that on the phone?"

"Class Rep. She asked if I had some old cookbooks and whether I could lend some to her. She even said she tried looking in the bookstore once but couldn't find anything suitable."

Fear nodded lightly:

"Hmm~ As expected of Kirika, so devoted to constant self-improvement... I can understand the how the humiliation must be, losing in those lunch duels again and again. By the way, why don't you simply give Kirika some actual guidance? Then she doesn't need to go through this convoluted way of borrowing books or whatever."

"Well—I have tried to mention that casually before... But for her, it feels like accepting favors from the opponent, so that doesn't seem to work. If it's a cookbook, however, how should I put this~? It's like studying from the same textbook in preparation for an exam, so it's fine. That's how she described it herself."

"I don't quite get it, but basically, it involves the matter of Kirika's pride? Then she'll be visiting later?"

"She said she's already at our entrance. Since I'll feel bad if she waited too long, let's hurry back home."

In accordance with what Haruaki said, they picked up their pace. After a few minutes, they could see the familiar uniform-clad figure of a girl standing at the familiar entrance of their home, leaning against the wall. Kirika snapped shut the cellphone she had been playing with in her boredom.

"Hello... Sorry for making a sudden visit."

"No, it's fine. Did you wait for long?"

"Not really that long. Hmm, Konoha-kun isn't with you two?"

"Having stayed away from work for so long, Cow Tits happened to run off for her part-time job today. Fufufu, lucky that obstructing Cow Tits is away, I can play while eating rice crackers as much as I want. Okay, Kirika, let's go inside right now!"

"I'm just here to borrow a book... But since I'm here anyway, I might as well take advantage of your hospitality a bit."

Kirika smiled wryly as she spoke. Naturally, Haruaki had no objections.

"Then I'll open the door right now. Please be patient... I guess I'll get the mail as well. Wow~ Quite a lot of letters."

Haruaki opened the mailbox beside the door and casually took out the letters and flyers inside. Perhaps due to the heavy rain the night before, many of the letters were still wet.

Deciding to check out their contents later, Haruaki clamped the mail under his arm and unlocked the door, then he opened the main residence's entrance. With that, they had successfully returned home. In any case, he invited Kirika to the living room first.

"Hmm, you guys took out the kotatsu^[5] for heating already? Speaking of which, it's about that time of the year, I guess."

"We just put it out yesterday. Oh right, you don't seem to have a kotatsu at home, Class Rep?"

"What!? Kirika doesn't have a kotatsu at home? Poor her... This is a napping device that's so wonderful, even I was astounded! So warm and comfortable that it makes you wanna yawn. Speaking of which, it's an amazing invention...! Of course, I'm already clear on how to use it. Switch ON! Here you go, Kirika, feel free to bury yourself beneath the kotatsu!"

"Your Japanese is a complete mess. Whatever. Class Rep, please warm yourself with the kotatsu. After putting the newly bought groceries in the fridge, I'll go find the book immediately."

"You don't have to hurry in finding the book. Well then, uh—Thank you for your hospitality."

Saying that, Kirika sat down beneath the kotatsu. The sight of her sitting formally in seiza seemed especially amusing.

Haruaki took this opportunity to put down the mail from under his arm, putting them on the kotatsu's edge, then he led Fear into the kitchen.

"Hey Haruaki, leave this to me today. I'll show you the results of my learning."

"Eh—Is that really okay? Let me test you first... Where does this head of cabbage go? Try it and see."

Haruaki randomly grabbed a cabbage from the shopping bag and handed it to Fear. Scoffing, Fear said:

"Don't underestimate me. It goes down there!"

"Next question, what about the eggs?"

"Eggs go here!"

"Mackerel."

"Fish goes on this side!"

As part of her test, Fear placed the various ingredients into the fridge. Amazingly, all the locations she picked were quite correct. However, given

the existing food in the fridge serving as hints, it came as no surprise that she would make no mistakes.

"Then here's the final question. Uh... That's the bag of rice crackers, right?"

Fear smiled proudly. For her, this question could not possibly be easier.

"Where that belongs, it goes without saying. Neither the fridge nor the cupboard—in other words, my belly! Fufu, I'll put a few into my stomach right now!"

Haruaki nimbly dodged Fear's hands that were reaching for the bag of rice crackers and sighed:

"I get it, I get it... Stop playing dumb with me and put them away properly. These are the tea snacks to bring out for Class Rep. Once you put the other stuff into the fridge, take the rice crackers to the living room."

Haruaki placed the entire bag of rice crackers onto Fear's head with a smack. Fear's eyes brightened as she went "Seriously?" Keeping the bag of rice crackers balanced on top of her head for some reason, she resumed rummaging through the things in the shopping bag.

"Great, the rice cracker party can start once I hurry and put the food away! You're not needed here, leave everything to me! Uh—This thing... Whatchamacallit... I remember now, mockery flower is a vegetable, so it goes here..."

"What's with that really weird naming sense? I know you mixed up broccoli and cauliflower, but what's with the 'm' in the beginning?"

"Y-You're being noisy. Isn't it fine as long as I put it in the right place?"

"But that's completely unacceptable on an educational level. Anyway, this is called broccoli. The white one is cauliflower."

Telling her the correct name as a matter of principle, Haruaki sighed. Although he was still worried, as long as she did not put eggs into the freezer, it was fine even if she messed up the remaining stuff. After all, her enthusiasm was a good thing. Haruaki decided to leave things here to her for now.

"Then I'm going to the room to find the book for Class Rep. If there's any food you don't know where it goes, just leave it for now. Do things properly."

Haruaki turned around as he spoke and heard Fear answering behind him with a perfunctory "Fine—"

"Hmm, this is the curly ball. This is definitely the curly ball. It goes here..."

What on earth was the curly ball? Quite worrying.

Part 3

As the kotatsu's warmth slowly seeped through her knees, Kirika exhaled softly. A fixture of this sort would take up a lot of space in the apartment. Furthermore, the air conditioner's heating function was more than enough, so there was no need for it—But indeed, the kotatsu was a wonderful thing.

Slowly, Kirika adjusted her sitting posture and relaxed her legs. Although she knew very well how uncomfortable it was to sit in seiza, spreading her calves and lowering her bottom to the floor was her limit. After all, vulnerably extending her legs out in such a cramped space would be quite dangerous, right? Besides, she was wearing a skirt, so... If that guy happened to take a seat at the kotatsu as well, what if their legs were to make contact—

"...Tsk!"

What delusions were she undergoing?

Although no one could see them, she still felt extremely embarrassed. As though trying to smash the kotatsu with her forehead, Kirika attempted to hide her current expression. At this moment, she heard a kind of rustling noise of friction. Looking up, she discovered that the mail which was originally on the corner of the table top had slid off the kotatsu, perhaps as a result of the impact just now.

Then Kirika saw that thing.

Who knew if it were because the envelope was not sealed tight or because it was drenched in the rain, a brown document envelope in the pile of mail opened up and even spilled its contents. It was not a letter. Extremely weird. Kirika could not fathom why such an object would be found among the mail.

"...?"

Thinking that "the contents of the envelope fell out, I must pick it up," Kirika carelessly reached out and grabbed it.

Instantly, her blood began to boil.

An impulse surfaced in her mind. No, it was not simply an impulse. Unbearable, absolutely unbearable. One after another, her brain cells were singing in perfect unison, slowly conveying a certain desire.

Indeed—The desire to put it on.

The hand holding the object lifted it up on its own accord. The body was greedily trying to satisfy this desire of hers. What was going on? So strange, I absolutely can't do this. Stop it! Why? In fact, I don't want to wear this kind of thing. I absolutely can't. So absolutely... Dear heavens, I really, really want to wear it...

(Oh no... Could this thing... actually... be cursed—?)

The remaining vestiges of reason in her mind drew out the answer.

But it was too late already.

"Eh, Class Rep... Where have you gone?"

Carrying quite a few cookbooks in his arms, Haruaki returned to the living room, but could not find any signs of Kirika. The only change in the room was that the pile of letters on the kotatsu had all slid off. Kirika's schoolbag was still present. She could not possibly have gone home on her own without informing him. Over in the kitchen, there were still sounds of shouting such as "This one goes here!" Hence, it did not seem like Fear had taken Kirika away. Most probable of all, she had gone to the washroom, right?

Thinking "I'll just have to wait for her return," Haruaki sat down at the kotatsu. Picking up the fallen mail and placing them on the kotatsu's table top once more, he slid his legs into the kotatsu. In that very instant—

Soft.

His legs felt a strange sensation.

Soft, supple and especially warm. Furthermore—quite large in size.

"W-What...?"

Haruaki could think of several possibilities.

(1) Kuroe or someone else had stuffed something like a doll inside.

(2) A lost cat had somehow trespassed at some point in time, but it was a really huge cat.

(3) He was imagining things.

"N-Not the third possibility...!"

While mentally rejecting his answer, Haruaki used the tip of his foot to poke the mysterious object. Soft... Supple... Furry. The object had long hair. Rustling, the object moved.

Haruaki gulped.

All he could think of was the second possibility. A giant cat of the long-haired variety. If it were a foreign breed, a larger body size would not be surprising. Indeed, that must be it. There was nothing to be afraid of, but he had to confirm...!

Having made his decision, Haruaki slowly lifted up the kotatsu blanket. Bit by bit, he slowly lifted it.

Then just as he held his breath while peering into the interior of the kotatsu that was filled with red light—

Something rushed out of the kotatsu instead.

"Eeek!"

"...Meow—"

In terms of end result...

(2) was the correct answer. A cat.

...But it was also Kirika as well.

Extending just her upper torso out of the kotatsu, Kirika was rubbing her face against Haruaki's chest.

Thinking this was utterly impossible, Haruaki devoted his utmost effort towards denying reality before his eyes. This was a dream. She is fake. Kirika could not possibly be doing this. She could not possibly be meowing

like a kitten. She could not possibly be smiling affectionately while seeking to be spoiled.

Right, furthermore, there was the most impossible detail. This was impossible even if the world was turned upside down.

Indeed, to think Kirika would sprout... sprout—

Logically speaking, cat ears could not possibly have sprouted from a human's head, right?

Part 4

Okay, the mystery was finally unraveled. The cat was also Kirika. Currently, Kirika was imitating a cat's behavior right here. This fact needed to be acknowledged. After all, this reality was displayed before his eyes. If he did not acknowledge it, nothing could proceed from here. But naturally, the problem was why would Kirika suddenly act like this despite her normally cool demeanor—

"Cl-Class Rep? What are you doing? Why would you suddenly play this kind of game? Rather, I should say that it's a bit inappropriate for you to press so closely against me. I'd be very thankful if you'll get away from me first. I-I get it, this must be a punishment game. Is this some kind of punishment game? It must be a tough life, being a class representative. Oh dear, it really must be tough! So, okay, it's almost time for your punishment game to end. Please come out from the kotatsu as well!"



"...Meow—?"

Despite Haruaki's stiffly delivered speech, Kirika simply tilted her head in puzzlement while still continuing to rub against his chest. She really sounded like a kitten while her eyes looked upward at him from close range. Impossible to know what had happened when she was burrowing into the kotatsu, but her original ponytail had become undone completely.

"Class Rep... Are you listening to me?"

"Mew... Meow~"

Clearly she was not listening and resumed the act of vigorously rubbing her cheek against his chest. Through the school uniform, Haruaki could feel Kirika's substantial body warmth that was bolstered by the kotatsu. That soft existence, hidden behind the fabric and the leather, was constantly pushing and pressing against him. Even if Haruaki wanted to struggle free by force, the kotatsu was in his way, preventing him from moving—

Weird, this was absolutely weird. Kirika was abnormal. Then why had she become so abnormal? There must be some reason behind this. The reason was what... What was it—?

"Could it be... this... thing...?"

Without any searching required, the number one suspect was right before his eyes. A mysterious ornament that neither belonged to this home nor could it possibly belong to Kirika—in other words, the cat ears worn on Kirika's head. Something like this could belong to Kuroe, but she was currently working at her shop. Also, it was impossible that she would leave this kind of thing lying around in the living room.

Haruaki reached out to lightly touch the cat ears. They felt soft and furry like a plush doll. Obviously, they could not be the real ears of a cat. It was one of those party goods that was worn on the head like a headband. But supposing it were the reason for Kirika's strange behavior, it could not possibly be any ordinary party good. In other words—

(It's a cursed tool...?)

In that case, it really could explain why Kirika had become like this. No, judging from the current situation, it was the only conclusion. That said, Haruaki still had many questions, such as: Where did this tool come from?

Why did Kirika put it on? Besides, could this kind of party good really be the recipient of a curse? In any case, all these puzzling questions could not be answered until Kirika was restored to normal. Hence, the first thing to do was to take those strange cat ears off.

While trying hard to ignore the sensation of Kirika's body that kept pressing towards him, Haruaki used his fingertips to grip the furry cat ears. Then he slowly pulled upwards—

"...H-How odd? Why doesn't... it come off..."

"Miii! H-Hu meow—!"

The cat ears showed no signs of budging. On the other hand, he was pulling Kirika's head upwards, accompanied by small screams. She even shook her head forcefully to get Haruaki's fingers to leave her cat ears. Perhaps it hurt.

"Woah... S-Sorry!?"

"..."

Kirika angrily pouted and looked up at Haruaki. Never seen this kind of expression from her before, Haruaki could not help but find her adorable. But he instantly recovered his rationality and shook his head.

(No, wait! Now isn't the time to be considering that, right? Although I've no idea how this happened, this is a huge crisis. Anyway, it's a very severe situation. I must find a way to return her to normal...!)

But why could these cat ears not be taken off? Was it the power of the cursed tool? No, jumping to that conclusion would be too hasty. Anyway, Haruaki decided to try again.

Perhaps feeling bullied, Kirika shrank back subtly with the kotatsu blanket covering her head while she looked up at him from time to time... This meant there was no way to touch those cat ears for now. Haruaki decided he must start with improving their relations first.

Haruaki coughed, cleared his throat and made a smile that even he himself found it quite fake. Then bending over to match the height of Kirika's sight, he started to please the Kirika Cat by using sounds that were basically for soothing a cat.

"Okay~ Great, a perfect finish! As much as I'd like to say that... Uumuu, there's still this one left?"

Fear frowned and took out the last item from the grocery bag. It was brown, slightly curved in shape and there was a bit of soil on its surface.

"Muu. This looks more mysterious the more I look at it. Although I think it's like a vegetable, it also resembles an ordinary tree root... Is this really food? I can't completely rule out the possibility of it being firewood."

Fear knew if Haruaki scolded or mocked her after the fact for putting things randomly into the fridge—How should she put this? She would be furious. Left without a choice, she decided to take the thing to the living room and ask Haruaki directly where it should go.

"Anyway~ The food is pretty much all put away, it's time to start the all-important rice crackers party!"

Holding the mysterious tree root (tentatively named), Fear proudly exited the kitchen with the entire bag of rice crackers still perched on her head. Seeing as it was placed on her head to begin with, Fear believed that it was well within her pride as a rice cracker fan to maintain its position. While keeping the rice crackers balanced without falling from her head, Fear ran nimbly to the living room. Just as she was about to enter and was thinking to herself, "by the way, we have rice crackers but no tea here, I'd better ask Haruaki to brew some tea"—She heard sounds from the living room.

"Sorry, Class Rep. It must have hurt when I did it so suddenly... Right?"

Haruaki's cat-soothing voice sounded unnaturally gentle and perverted.

Fear's expression instantly froze. What? What was happening inside?

Holding her breath, she slowly peeked into the living room from the doorway. Haruaki was sitting at the kotatsu with his back towards her. The words he just said were most likely directed towards Kirika, but she was not visible. No, on further examination, Haruaki had lifted up the kotatsu blanket and was speaking at the kotatsu's interior—or rather, towards the space between his legs. That was even more incomprehensible. Fear could not comprehend at all. But judging from his behavior in conjunction with his earlier words, no mistake about it—All Fear could conclude was that Haruaki was pressing Kirika down between his legs.

"I'm sorry about just now. So please, come over here..."

"...mmmmmee..."

Kirika moaned unbelievably and Fear could hear the friction of clothing. Haruaki's voice turned even more gentle—

"Yes, good girl. I won't hurt you again. Please. I'll be gentle. May I touch again...?"

"Meow... Meow!"

"You'll let me touch? Th-Thank you. So... I'm going to touch you. Relax, don't be afraid. Look..."

Fear could hear a sound like something breaking in her mind. Then she began to countdown.

Three. Two. One—

Then came zero. At the same time, a critical sentence was heard.

"So, Class Rep, I'll be very gentle to you. Just a little bit, may I... pull this...?"

"OF. COURSE. NOT—Forbidden!"

Fear charged forward and used the mysterious root in her hand to strike the back of Haruaki's head viciously.

Accompanied by a cracking sound, the object broke into two.

"Guh! Th-That really hurts! Why the heck did you suddenly attack me with the burdock!?"

Fear finally got her answer from Haruaki's screams.

So this thing was called the burdock? Why did it look completely different after being cooked and served on a dish?

Part 5

"O-Oh~ ...I see now. Truly shameless. Anyway, I already understand the whole story. Truly shameless. I can tell that Kirika does look quite strange. Truly shameless. If the cause really is a cursed tool, that's truly shameless. This must be handled calmly. Truly shameless. Go and die."

"C-Completely exposed! Your true intentions are completely exposed in between those sentences of yours, Fear!"

Arms crossed before her chest, Fear went "Hmph!" and turned her face to the side. While explaining the circumstances to Fear, Haruaki also managed to pull Kirika out from inside the kotatsu—But rather than improving, the situation had deteriorated subtly. Kirika was now leaning her face against Haruaki's thigh and rubbing it furiously while he sat cross-legged. Meanwhile, she kept purring happily. If anyone tried to pull her away by force, she would make a sad expression. The situation was extremely tricky.

Haruaki rubbed the still aching back of his head while sighing. As a side note, the tragic remains of the fibrous murder weapon was now lying on top of the kotatsu.

"How troubling, but we must handle this calmly. Why don't you settle down and help me, Fear? Otherwise, I'm completely out of ideas by myself."

"Jeez—it can't be helped. For now, I'll pretend I never saw you taking advantage of the situation to enjoy the shamelessness earlier... Umm, anyway, it's undeniable fact that we must find a way to solve the problem of Kirika turning into a cat."

"Rather than a cat, I think she's closer to a hybrid between a kitten and a human. What happened just now gave me a thought. She seems to be able to understand what we're saying. However, she only answers... in cat language... H-Hey!"

Kirika placed her head on his lap and started rolling about. Since she was wearing the school uniform, her skirt was curling up slightly and it looked quite dangerous. In many ways, it was extremely concerning.

"Hahaha. She really likes to stick to you, Haruaki."

"Y-Your cold laughter only fills me with terror... Hurry and come up with a solution, okay!?"

"Even if you say that, I can't help it. Hey, Kirika Cat, do you wanna play with me—? Come~ This way this way!"

Fear clapped her hands and tried to get Kirika's attention. Curious, Kirika went "Hmm hmm?" and looked up towards her. Fear continued:

"This is a special privilege for you. I allow you to play with my silver hair—Okay, come here now—"

Fear started to shake her silver hair lightly. Perhaps curious about the hair, Kirika slowly turned her upper body and stared straight towards Fear's hair that was dangling over the tatami floor. She had a hesitant expression as though wondering whether she should play with it or not.

"M-Muu~ This might be disrespectful towards Kirika, but don't you find her especially cute the way she acts like a cat...? Oh, so the number one culprit candidate is this pair of cat ears?"

Fear looked downwards at Kirika's head as she approached, frowned and spoke:

"...Well, I can feel an ominous aura from it for sure. If you say it's cursed, I don't think that's likely to be wrong."

"Really? I knew it. So things should be solved by taking it off... But like I said just now, it doesn't come off no matter what."

"Hmm..."

For a few seconds, Fear stared straight at the cat ears that were waving back and forth before her eyes.

Suddenly, she grabbed the cat ears and pulled upwards.

"H-Hu myaaaaaaaah!?"

"Hey!"

It must have hurt a lot? Originally intending to reach into the silver hair, Kirika was so surprised that her entire body jumped outright. After performing a somersault, she leaned against Haruaki's body again.

"Hey, didn't I just tell you that it can't be pulled off!?"

"I-I just wanted to confirm for myself! S-Sorry, Kirika. It's my fault just now. I won't do that again. I'll be very gentle. Okay, come over to me~"

Fear's cat-soothing voice only sounded terrifying to Kirika. Whimpering softly, Kirika only dared to peer hazily at Fear with her tearful eyes while hiding behind Haruaki's back.

"Guh... S-She's really too cute. But she only sticks to you, Haruaki, I'm so jealous... No wait! You shameless brat, that's so underhanded of you! What shameless means did you use to entice the Kirika Cat? I won't forgive you! Looking at the way she sticks close to you so obediently, you must have tamed and broken her through utterly shameless means for sure! I'll curse you!"

"Stop saying weird things like broken! It's just she met me before you, so she's more familiar with me, okay!?"

"Hmph... Like anyone would know. Whatever, anyway, those cat ears can't be taken off by force apparently. In that case, the remaining method is—"

"Hmm...? Wait a sec, I've got an idea."

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it's actually quite simple. Since it can't be taken off, why not just break it? If I asked Konoha, I'm sure it can be cut safely whether she did it in sword or human form... But the problem is that she needs to work until night. If I call her and asked her to get off early... I dunno if that'll work or not... Hmmmmmmm."

As the saying went, sacrifices were unavoidable when trying to get out of an urgent situation. However, Konoha's part-time job was also quite important. In any case, Kirika's affliction only seemed to be acting like a cat, so there should not be any major problem in leaving her in this state until night came... No wait, it might be too late to react once something damaging happened...

Thinking to this point, Fear nodded forcefully.

"I see. Breaking is not a bad idea indeed. But—"

"But what?"

"...There's actually no need to wait for Cow Tits to return. Neither do you need her to get off work early. Her help is not needed at all. Just let me do it. Fufu, let's just use this... Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»—Curse Calling!"

The Rubik's cube taken out by Fear instantly turned into a metallic cube, then it transformed rapidly, finally presenting a vicious hatchet. The blade glimmered brightly. Simply by looking at its long and massive shape, one would feel their life was endangered.

Hiding behind Haruaki's back, peeking at Fear from over his shoulder, Kirika was so frightened that she curled herself further into a ball. Haruaki could feel the sense of terror she was exuding as she hid behind his back—

"No, wait, I think that's too terrifying! You need to be more gentle. So I think it's better to get Konoha's help instead!"

"What are you talking about? We can't possibly wait until night. Besides, that means I'll have to keep watching Kirika intimately stuck to you until tonight. No wait, you're asking me to watch from the sidelines while feeling jealous of how you're monopolizing the adorable Kirika Cat—Arghhh, I can't tolerate this any further! So I must destroy it right now, let me do it!"

"Calm down! Look carefully, it's possible that not only the ears but you also need to be precise enough to destroy the headband portion together at the same time! Y-You wouldn't happen to be thinking that just because she's Class Rep, injuring her a little wouldn't matter, would you?"

"Stop looking down on others. My intentions are not that awful. I'm confident that I won't harm her at all! What~ I just need to destroy it precisely, right? Leave it to me... Fufufu."

Fear smiled confidently and malevolently while approaching slowly with the axe in her hand, meanwhile gesturing with her free hand in an attempt to summon Kirika.

"Okay, Kirika, come on over to me, okay...?"

"H-Hu mii..."

Kirika sounded even more like a kitten while her shoulders trembled nonstop.

"You don't need to be so afraid, this is to help you..."

"...(twitch twitch)."

"Just close your eyes and it'll be over in an instant..."

"...(shudder shudder)."

"Ahhh~ Look how you're trembling so much, you really look quite pitiful. Don't worry..."

Moving in a floating manner like a ghost, Fear took another step forward.

Then she slowly raised the hatchet.

"That's right, don't... worry... I won't hurt you! Fufufufu!"

"Eee... Eee meow—!"

"Hey—! You're deliberately scaring her, right? I can tell from a single glance! Eh, Class Rep?"

Accompanied by a loud scream, Haruaki's shoulder suddenly felt lighter. As he looked back, he saw Kirika's hair swaying as she rushed out of the living room and disappeared from sight.

"Aww crap! She ran away!"

"That's totally obvious! In that situation just now, even I wanted to run away!"

In any case, they had to chase her. Haruaki and Fear ran out of the living room together but did not see Kirika in the corridor.

"Hey~ Class Rep, where are you—?"

Thud!

Hearing the noise, Haruaki and Fear exchanged glances then slowly made their way towards the apparent source, the kitchen. They ended up finding Kirika who was trying to hide like a cat.

If one had to sum up the scene in a single sentence...

She was in the cupboard.

Hiding in the lowest shelf. Naturally, the cupboard was filled with stuff while Kirika was a human-sized cat, which meant there was no way she could hide completely... She was simply concealing her head while exposing her rear, and rather than rear, it would be more accurate to describe the outrageous scene as her lower half poking out of the cupboard.

"Class Rep...?"

"Mew..."

"What kind of hiding is this? I've found you."

"Meow!"

Kirika responded to Haruaki's calls and exposed her face, but as soon as she spotted Fear's presence, she immediately scurried away and fled. Due to moving bipedally, her speed was quite fast... But even if she moved on all fours like a cat instead, there would be other troubles. First of all, the most dangerous part was her skirt which would further increase the feeling that he might see something that he should not.

"Woah, she ran away again! Anyway, Fear, put that hatchet away first!"

"Muu, I forgot."

"Jeez..."

After waiting for Fear to put away the torture tool, Haruaki left the kitchen together with her. But again, Kirika's trail was lost. Further delays might end up with her running outside, hence they had to hurry and find her—

But at this moment, an extremely ominous feeling surfaced in Haruaki's mind.

He asked himself:

...Generally speaking, escaped cats were never that easy to catch, right?

Haruaki's prediction proved to be correct as their fruitless chase persisted for quite a while. Kirika ran randomly all over the place inside the house, crouching behind the shoe cabinet, burrowing into the futon that Fear had not put away after getting up from bed, or entering the kotatsu again, or charging into a cupboard—

"Guah... Lost her again... Where are you?"

Haruaki groaned while searching the corridor. Fear was not with him, for she had fled screaming, scared off by a spider that came running out of a cupboard. Once she recovered from her shock, she was probably going to resume helping with the search. Although he would be sorry to say this to Fear, judging from the reason why Kirika was running away, Haruaki felt that he would have a higher chance of catching her by himself alone...

Advancing casually, Haruaki was thinking "it'd be nice if I found her during this time"—He heard a noise again. This time, it came from the changing area of the bathroom. Tiptoeing his way into the changing area, Haruaki did not see Kirika. Neither had she covered herself with the dirty clothing. In that case, she was probably in the bathroom.

"But why didn't I see her... Could she be over there?"

Haruaki pushed open the bathtub lid and looked inside, the result was—

"...M-Meow."

He found her. Kirika had curled herself up to hide in the empty bathtub. Although he startled her the instant the lid was lifted, as soon as she discovered that it was Haruaki standing before her, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Fear has incurred your dislike already huh... But let's put that aside first. Class Rep, it's okay now. Anyway, please don't flee again. Come with me."

"Hu mii..."

"Don't worry, relax. Okay, I'll protect you from getting harmed by that silver demon."

Haruaki smiled as he spoke to her. Only after a long while did Kirika slowly extend her hand from the tub. Just as Haruaki gently held her hand in return—

"Seriously, that damned weird creature... So good at running. Hey~ Haruaki, where are you—?"

"...!"

"Woah!"

As soon as she heard Fear's voice, Kirika withdrew her arm forcefully. Left without a choice, Haruaki was dragged into the bathtub. Kirika even closed both her arms tightly around the back of his neck. During this time, Haruaki heard a thudding noise behind him as his view grew dim—Kirika had probably used her feet to close up the bathtub lid.

(This... is...)

Perhaps afraid of being discovered by Fear, she wanted Haruaki to hide together with her. As much as Haruaki could sympathize with how she felt, having their bodies intimately pressed together like this was really quite problematic. Due to the closed lid, Haruaki could not see clearly but not only were his ears feeling Kirika's breath, he could also feel something soft underneath him and even his legs were being clamped immobile by

something—As soon as he calmly pondered his body's state, Haruaki could not help but think "this is quite terrible."

Just as Haruaki remained frozen there, Fear's voice came closer and closer.

"Hey, then is it the bathroom...?"

At this moment, Kirika suddenly applied greater force to his neck. In other words, something was pressed completely against Haruaki's body. Haruaki had no choice but to focus like an ascetic monk and avoid thinking.

Their pounding heart beats sounded in unison for a few seconds—

"Hmm~ Not here..."

Fear did not continue speaking. Apparently, she had not discovered the two of them here. Haruaki exhaled with relief and spoke softly in the darkness:

"S-She seems to have left. So Class Rep, could you please let go of me..."

"Suu... Huff~ Mew..."

"Y-You're sniffing scent...?"

"...Meow, mmm—!"

"Woah, why are you hugging me tighter and tighter? Wait a sec, okay, the danger has already left, calm down! Class Rep, wah! Why are you pressing that spot against this place—?"

Just as Haruaki struggled desperately, trying to free himself from Kirika's embrace, his dark field of view suddenly became bright, allowing him to see Kirika's ecstatic expression while hugging him. This situation meant that someone had lifted the bathtub's lid—

"Ah... Ah..."

With stiff motions, Haruaki looked back. Standing over there, obviously holding the lid, smiling at the sight of Haruaki and Kirika entangled together in the narrow space—Fear.

"Fufu... Thinking you were probably here, I bluffed and wouldn't you know it, I caught you red-handed... Fufufu."

Then Fear smiled like an executioner—

Silently, she took out the Rubik's cube from her pocket.

"You misunderstood, Fear! This isn't what you think..."

"Hahaha, it doesn't matter, Haruaki. I already know everything. You don't need to explain anymore..."

Just as previously, the toy clicked and transformed into a vicious hatchet.

"I really made a mistake. The first person this hatchet needs to chop is you instead of Kirika! I will teach you a good lesson, you shameless brat! Just sit there obediently—!"

"Eeeek!?"

"Hu meow!?"

Fear's expanding aura of murderous rage was enough to send Kirika into an even more serious state of panic. Hence, she desperately struggled in the cramped bathtub, finally standing up.



"Wah~ Class Rep, please calm down... Ouch ouch!"

"Meow—!"

Stepping on Haruaki's shoulder and head as a foothold, Kirika tried her utmost to escape Fear who was right in front of her. But because Fear blocked the way to the rinsing area, she ran in the opposite direction... In other words, she noisily opened the window above the bathtub and escaped outside. Thinking "Oh no!", Haruaki frantically poked his body out of the window and looked outside. Perhaps bringing out primal instincts due to desperation, Kirika displayed cat skills even further and instantly climbed up to the roof using a nearby drainpipe.

"Oh man, things have become even worse...!"

"Th-That's not my fault, okay? Everything just now was your fault for being too shameless!"

Fear spoke while putting on her shoes to go outside. Looking up at roof from the garden, they could see Kirika curling herself into a ball on the tiles, her body trembling.

"Cl-Class Rep..."

"Hurry and come down—I'm really sorry for earlier. Look, there's nothing in my hands anymore—!"

The two of them tried to call her down, but only managed to make Kirika even more afraid. The instant she heard the noise, she became frightened and frantically tried to dash to the other end of the roof to find a place to hide. Peering from highest point of the roof to reveal half of her face, she looked down towards them with worried eyes of trepidation.

"It's not working... It'll be bad if she fell down. We must hurry and protect her."

"I can jump that kind of height, leave it to me!"

Haruaki narrowed his eyes in derision and tightly grabbed Fear's collar just as she crouched down in preparation to jump.

"Hold it right there for me. I haven't forgotten how you damaged the roof tiles when you first arrived here. If you break the tiles again, I'll definitely need to call someone in to fix it... Also thinking back now, it's quite a miracle that only the tiles were broken at the time. If you end up making a

huge hole in the ceiling as a result of believing in another miracle, it'll drive me nuts."

"I-I'm not that heavy, okay! I'll curse you!"

"By the way, I think if you go, you'll only scare her into running all over the place. In this kind of state, the same could happen if I went, but at least the chances are much better than yours. So I'll go up and you wait here. Uh—I remember the ladder being in the storeroom..."

"Muu... No other way, I guess."

Despite her reluctance, Fear seemed to be persuaded after all. Hence, Haruaki took out a foldable ladder from the accessory dwelling's storeroom and used it to climb to the roof top. Perhaps because the sun was about to set, at this unsheltered location, the wind felt especially chilly.

"Well... then..."

He checked out the roof top and found Kirika looking towards him from the other end of the roof, her eyes still filled with terror.

"A-Aren't you cold, Class Rep? We can go back to the kotatsu to warm ourselves—"

"..."

Haruaki took a light step forward. Kirika swiftly moved to the side. Whenever Haruaki tried to circle over to her side, she would move in the opposite direction to increase their distance. Perhaps due to the excessive terror caused by the earlier murderous aura, her wariness was unprecedented.

"It's really okay. See, I'm alone."

"Meow..."

Although Haruaki spread his hands to show that everything was safe and alright, Kirika still refused to lower her guard. She simply maintained a fixed distance and stared directly towards Haruaki.

No good... Haruaki sighed. Seriously, how did things come to this? Naturally, it was entirely the fault of the cursed cat ears—

Haruaki thought "oh right." A cursed tool—Due to their obvious existence, he had forgotten that this home was that kind of place, a house where

cursed tools were gathered. Although he had no recollection of those cat ears, it could very well have come from somewhere in his own house. Just by chance, Kirika came upon it, and just by chance, she had put it on, probably. Simply put, the reason she became like this was—

"Class Rep... I'm sorry."

He muttered.

Indeed, his home was to blame. Upon reflection, Haruaki remembered that this home was used to keep large numbers of cursed tools. Although he was fine due to his constitution, to others, to ordinary humans like Kirika, this kind of place was far too dangerous.

Were this an ordinary household, Kirika obviously would not have suffered such a fate. She would have visited this home normally, drank tea normally, then returned home normally after borrowing the cookbooks normally. Nevertheless, none of these matter-of-fact imagery could be witnessed in this home. Because it was this kind of home, those imagery could not exist.

However—Haruaki narrowed his eyes.

That sort of normal life would require everything here in exchange. Were it not for this house being the place where cursed tools were gathered, Haruaki would not have gotten to know Fear, Konoha and Kuroe. As for Kirika, perhaps their relationship would not have grown so close either.

Actually, thinking over these hypothetical situations was useless, because right now, only this kind of life and this kind of home was "normal." There was absolutely no way of changing predetermined reality.

Hence, hence all he could say to her, sure enough, was—

"...S-Sorry."

Repeating the same word, Haruaki could only smile wryly as he watched Kirika make a slightly doubtful expression of "...?" while he slowly sat down on the spot. Haruaki felt the hardness of the tiles from his bottom.

"Hmm... I will accompany you until you're willing, Class Rep. Before you calm down, I'll be right here waiting for you. I won't force you to do anything and I absolutely won't do anything excessive. I promise you... So, anyway, we'll just wait here leisurely."

"Meow...?"

"Haha, you can understand what I'm saying...? Oh well, it's been quite a long time since I last visited the roof, so it's quite refreshing for me too. It'd be better if only I had brought tea or something up here—Ow!"

Just as Haruaki mentally prepared himself for a long haul and his hand reached behind his back to support himself, he felt a slight pain on his palm. The roof tile at that position was already cracked so his palm was cut by the slightly protruding edge of the broken tile. Seeing the continuous bleeding, Haruaki frowned.

"Hmm, how unlucky, is this caused by the destruction Fear wrought last time? Looks like I better not be stingy with the money and get someone to fix the tiles as quickly as possible... Woah!"

His body suddenly felt an impact and was pushed over with a slam. If he were not sitting, surely he would have been sent flying and fallen off the roof. Feeling terrified, Haruaki looked at the object that had charged at his body—Naturally, it was Kirika.

"Meow... Meow~ Meow..."

Her voice sounded sad. Her expression likewise. Having pushed Haruaki down, Kirika lightly brought her face against Haruaki's hand—

Then she stuck out her tongue.

And licked the wound.

"Meow... Mmm... Mmm, meow..."

"W-Woah~ Class Rep?"

There was a slight sound of moistness. The blood flowing down the palm was carefully licked clean by Kirika's mouth. Haruaki could feel surprising warmth from her tongue. Perhaps due to the pain of the wound, he could no longer distinguish her temperature. Calmly and without hurrying, she continued to move her little tongue nimbly. Lick lick, lickety lick.

"..."

Although this situation was absolutely embarrassing, Haruaki could not move his hand because Kirika was gripping it tightly. Neither could he

shake her off forcefully. In any case, he had no choice but to acquiesce to her wishes.

At this moment, an unimportant question of "do cats have this kind of habit?" crossed his mind while he sighed slightly wryly.

"To think I had such a tough time catching you earlier, yet once I decided to wait patiently, I ended up catching you successfully instead. What is this?"

"...Meow?"

Reacting to Haruaki's muttering, Kirika looked up at him.

"Oh~ It's over? Uh—Thank you for licking my wound... Should I thank you first for that? Okay, the bleeding's almost stopped, it's already okay."

Haruaki lightly clenched his fist and opened it to show that his hand was already fine. Kirika also smiled happily, purring vaguely in cat language, then she pressed her entire body against Haruaki tightly. He was once again cornered with no way out.

"How troubling... I guess I'll have to stay like this for now."

Hearing her answer with a meow, Haruaki made a wry expression. He could hear a cat's purrs by his ear. Kirika's warm body weight was resting on top of him, as though trying to protect him from the chill of the blowing wind. The view before his eyes was still the familiar and peaceful sky, generously displaying a wondrous and picturesque sunset. On further thought, Haruaki realized that the last time he had lain down like this to watch the sky was already a long time ago.

"Mmm meow... Hoo—..."

Suddenly, what entered Haruaki's ears were breathing noises following a regular rhythm. Bringing his gaze back from the sky, he found Kirika sleeping with a blissful expression on her face with eyes closed. Furthermore, she was using his stomach as a pillow.

"Doing as pleased, nothing less expected from a cat... Woah!"

"..."

Haruaki almost jumped out of his skin. Without him noticing, Fear had climbed up, standing on the top of the ladder, she leaned her upper body

forward onto the roof to look in his direction. Fear's vicious expression looked as though she was about to break out in loud cursing but immediately, she noticed that Kirika was sleeping. Hence, she reluctantly shut her mouth, probably deciding that there would be no benefit in waking her up at this point in time.

Instead, Fear pouted with displeasure, gesturing with one hand repeatedly while standing on the ladder. Was she trying to convey some kind of message?

(ㄔ... i... l... l...? W-What kind of secret code is this...?)

She kept repeating the same motions. Haruaki finally figured it out. It was mirror-reversed because he had not realized that his position was opposite to hers. In that case—

—I'm gonna kill you.

(You've got to be kidding, right!?)

Just as Haruaki tried to gesture in response that "You've got the wrong idea, it's Kirika who hugged me on her own until she fell asleep"—

The motion of his arm ended up causing his fingertips to touch Kirika's cat ears lightly.

"...Eh?" "Hmm?"

Haruaki stared in wide-eyed amazement while Fear frowned and leaned forward in puzzlement.

The cat ears that originally could not be pulled off no matter what, unbelievably... What on earth was going on?

The cat ears easily separated from Kirika's head and rolled over the roof tiles before their eyes.

Part 6

With that, the mystery was completely solved.

While relying on Fear to transport the sleeping Kirika secretly back to the living room kotatsu, Haruaki discovered a scrunched up envelope beneath the kotatsu blanket. Inside was a letter that started with the following greeting: "I am a housewife, please forgive me for writing this letter out of

the blue..." Reading further, Haruaki found the explanation about the dangerous item she had enclosed with the letter.

The letter explained that her husband had bought the item from somewhere. While treating what he had heard from the seller as a complete joke, the husband had retold some of it to the housewife. The tool was a problematic object, apparently used by a certain pervert in the past. A man who was abnormally obsessed with cat ears had imprisoned his lover and frequently forced her to behave like a cat while wearing cat ears. This coercion went as far as to persist for a number of years. The housewife's letter also mentioned that the cat ears were very scary. As soon as one laid eyes on them, one would be compelled to put them on. She had worn them once, but it was also the final time as well, because this thing was impossible to remove unless the wearer fell asleep from exhaustion while playing around as a cat...! She was truly and very sorry, although she had only heard rumors, if this letter really managed to reach its destination, she hoped that the receiver could get rid of this inauspicious tool. Ultimately, the true culprit was her own husband and she never imagined that he would have that kind of fetish. Hence, her passion that had lasted many years suddenly cooled off and she was now seriously considering divorce, etc. Since the remainder of the letter consisted of a long series of domestic resentment, Haruaki simply skimmed over the rest and only read the important parts. During the few seconds it took for him to browse the remaining content, Fear had already swung the hatchet to chop the cat ears accessory into two.

Naturally, the letter and the cat ears were taken care of discreetly, all buried in darkness. Not long after that, Kirika woke up in kotatsu, apparently with no recollection of what had happened. This came as quite a relief.

Due to the time getting late, Kirika also prepared to return home. Haruaki accompanied her to the entryway to see her off. As a side note, during this time, Fear was industriously wrapping the snapped burdock in newspaper and placing it in the cupboard.

While Kirika was bending over at the entrance to put on her shoes, she murmured emphatically:

"How troubling, to think I'd fall asleep in someone else's house. Clearly you should have woken me..."

"Eh, umm—Well, uh—That! Because you looked like you were sleeping very comfortably, Class Rep, we felt bad about waking you up. That's basically it!"

Kirika straightened up while gazing back at Haruaki who was acting bizarrely.

"Why does it feel a bit strange... Could it be that something happened while I was asleep? With Fear present as well, I can't help but imagine in a very ridiculous direction."

"W-What are you talking about, Class Rep? How could anything like that happen? That really would be absolutely ridiculous, right? A-Ahaha!"

Eyes of skepticism shot back at him but Haruaki had no choice but to feign ignorance of the matter, because everything that happened today was best forgotten... Whether for Kirika's or their sake. After all, given how cool her usual demeanor was, who knew how serious the mental trauma she would suffer were she to know what she had done.

Damage. Trauma. Such terms lingered in Haruaki's mind. The thoughts that had crossed his mind earlier on the roof surfaced again. The cause of Kirika's condition really did stem from this house. Today, he could still pretend to have no memory of what happened but that was impossible to guarantee next time because more direct harm might result.

"Then, uh... Class Rep."

Finally speaking up with much difficulty, Haruaki began to hesitate. What should he say? The idea that "this home might be very dangerous to Kirika" did cross his mind indeed, but he neither dared nor wanted to tell her something like "So please don't come again." Dear heavens, what should he do—

Just as Haruaki acted indecisively because of such issues, he heard Kirika giggling.

He looked up to see her friendly smile.

"—I will visit again. In actual fact, even I'm a bit embarrassed about coming over without notice."

"Eh?"

Her words sounded as though she had read his mind. Just as Haruaki looked back at Kirika's face, she blushed for some reason and diverted her gaze, even continuing to speak softly:

"W-What is with that amazed expression on your face? It's not like this is anything weird... Your home is a Japanese-style house that's quite rare in the modern age. Apart from the sense of nostalgia, it also feels fresh, plus Fear-kun and the others live here. Well... I feel... very happy. There's no other... special meaning, okay?"

"Ah—Yeah. If you want to visit, it's no problem at all, umm..."

At this moment, Kirika coughed to clear her throat and interrupted Haruaki, then she said:

"Well... If there's anything to worry about, it's that this home's situation is a bit special. If any dangerous item were to be released from your home, it would be troubling from my perspective. However—even if there were any dangerous tools that had caused problems in the past, so long as you manage them properly, there shouldn't be anything to worry about, right?"

"Ah, yeah, that's right... Well said. I'll manage them carefully, absolutely."

Haruaki carved the words he said deep into his heart. That was all he could do—He resolved with determination. After all, there was no way to change the situation at home—In that case, all he could do was work hard to avoid exposing Kirika to danger.

Although he was only shouting mentally, Haruaki felt his mood seem to lift slightly. Once again, he steeled his resolve and looked up at Kirika, only to find that she had turned around and placed her hand against the main door. Lifting her schoolbag lightly, she said:

"So, that's it for today. Also, thank you for your cookbooks... If my lunchbox tomorrow rises exceptionally in quality, that means I've been losing all this time because of my reference books rather than my cooking skills...! Fufufu, you should prepare yourself for defeat."

"Then I should ask you to show some mercy..."

The entrance opened and then shut.

The space where Kirika had departed from was filled with Haruaki's sighs.

Although a lot had happened, it was finally over. Luckily, he covered it up successfully... Or rather, when parting, the thought of "that was close" had crossed his mind. It would have been a bit unnatural if he had been the one to bring up this home's situation. Also, had he really done that, it would have brought forth unnecessary speculation from the other person. Ahhh, seriously—

Thank goodness that Kirika happened to bring the subject up on her own.

Back to her own apartment...

"..."

Walking into the living room, Kirika dropped the schoolbag by her feet. Immediately she fell upon her knees on the floor. Then Kirika—

"...Uwaaaaaah!"

Clutching her head, she began to roll from side to side.

In actual fact, she remembered everything.

She remembered everything very clearly.

Everything!

"I-I can't believe... I did that, I... To think I... To think I...!"

I had no choice but to pretend I forgot. How should I face him from now on? I don't want this kind of memory. I hope it can disappear. Oh God, please, God! The embarrassment is killing me, I just want to die and end everything! I'll simply kill him and suicide straight after. Calm down, even if I do that I won't wipe away the fact that I was once a cat. Rubbing myself repeatedly against him and hugging him tightly, even sniffing his scent and licking him. There's no doubt that I'm the one who did those actions, using this body...!

"Ooh, uwah... Uwaahh...!"

Roll roll roll.

Roll roll roll roll...

Kirika continued to roll on the floor in solitary agony, clutching her head as though trying to cover up her blushing cheeks.

Rolling nonstop, rolling nonstop.

The next morning, a certain mother and daughter in the family living one floor below were discussing the mysterious and inexplicable phenomena they had experienced separately the previous night. "I think I heard a scary girl's moans." "No wait. What I heard was the sound of something rolling." Then hearing their discussion, the grandmother began to recount the past in a grave tone of voice: "In these parts, long long time ago, there was a legend of a woman executed by decapitation, whose 'rolling head' kept searching for her body..." During this time, only the father, whose status was pitiful in this household where female authority reigned supreme, humbly proposed a very straightforward idea: "Perhaps there's a large cat messing around upstairs...?"

Of course, in a certain sense, his suggestion was the correct answer. Nevertheless, it was instantly ignored by the entire family.

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



とある出会いの死亡遊戯



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 6 - A Certain Encountered Deathmatch

—This story happened some time ago in the past.

Part 1

The kitchen on one evening.

He was speaking in a slightly annoyed voice he had recently been using quite frequently.

"Help me bring the onions over from that side, Kono-nee."

"Ah yes—Umm, this saury is quite plump. It looks like it'll be very delicious."

"...Because it's currently during the height of autumn, of course it'll be delicious. On the other hand, it's just Old Pops returning. Is there any need to cook up such a feast to welcome him back? Besides, you don't need to help out in the kitchen, Kono-nee."

Haruaki used the kitchen knife while speaking in a nagging manner. Standing beside him, keeping an eye on the roasting saury's progress, Konoha smiled as she looked at Haruaki's profile and said:

"It's so rare for Honatsu-san to return, what's so bad about making a feast to welcome him back? Besides, didn't he say on the phone he'd also bring a souvenir back? Just think of this as a return gift."

"I don't want any souvenir at all. Surely, it's not going to be anything amazing."

"W-Well~ I agree too... But then, it's been quite a while since the last time I cooked together with you, Haruaki-kun, so it's quite delightful. I entered the kitchen voluntarily, so please allow me to help you."

"It can't be that fun to be cooking together with me..."

Haruaki looked down at the cutting board while speaking without facing Konoha. Although it saddened her, this behavior of his was also quite frequent lately.

At this moment, the doorbell rang from the main entrance. Looking at the time, it was probably the return of Haruaki's father whom they were

discussing. Away from home for extended periods of time, pressing the doorbell when returning had already become something like a habit for him. It seemed to be a little ritual for differentiation in mood.

"...Kono-nee, you go open the door."

"No, I believe it's best if you opened it. A father would definitely be happy to find his son welcoming him at the door. As for the cooking, let me tend to it in your stead for now."

Konoha waited there after saying that. Suddenly, a great noise was heard from the cutting board that was being used for chopping vegetables.

"Good grief..."

Haruaki put down the kitchen knife as though giving up and walked out of the kitchen.

Konoha sighed while watching him leave, thinking "Is this what they call a rebellious phase~?" Haruaki had started middle school half a year ago. Although Konoha only learnt about the term from books and television, now was probably about time for him to enter that phase. An age when self-awareness bloomed and a desire for independence awakened. It had already been several years since she first met him in this home. He had grown much taller and could not be compared to back then. In other words, both his body and mind were developing, right?

(Indeed, it was perfectly natural for humans to grow up and mature through a development process. Rather, this type of situation was not bad at all... Yes. But I'll be counting my blessings so long as he doesn't swear, get mad or say "You're so annoying!" to me like what they show on television. Ahhh, even so... It's still a bit sad...)

Konoha sighed a second time. Checking the saury's roasting progress again, she took up the kitchen knife and chopped vegetables for him. Back when she first arrived, she did not know anything, but now, even the kitchen knife was something she could wield with ease—But on occasion, when making breakfast, she would still end up almost cutting her hand due to being half asleep.

"This is what's meant by time being the solution to all problems, right..."

She murmured. In fact, she understood quite well that all she could do was wait for time to pass. Trying too hard to take care of him could end up

counterproductive—It could very well breed annoyance or resentment within him. Precisely because of that, she was keeping her distance slightly, suppressing her desire to cook together in the kitchen like this every day. She would enjoy this simple pleasure again once he went through this rebellious phase. Indeed, once he started going to high school, she could deliver meat and potato stew for him or cook together like this. Eventually one day, I won't have to live in the accessory dwelling anymore, instead sharing the same roof using other reasons. After that, after that...!

"Ufu, ufufufu... W-Why am I laughing nonstop on my own in such a silly manner? That'll make me nothing more than a dangerous person."

Konoha shook her head hard then returned to her task of cutting up the onions.

No matter what, all she could do was endure. Of course, the current sibling relationship was not bad either, but one day, he was going to grow up to be an amazing man. Definitely. So for the sake of that day and for the sake of the day when she would no longer be his elder sister, she must maintain this distance at arm's length—Watching over him while he matured in a wholesome manner. Ahhh~ There were so many things to pay attention to, such as whether he was studying hard? Was he making bad friends? Did he desire antisocial behavior like smoking? Also... Was he developing indecent and impure relations with the opposite gender...!?

(No, if he were completely uninterested in girls, it'd be dangerous also in a different sense. Being interested is only natural... Besides, the one closest to him is me. It's almost about time for him to start peeking when I'm changing. But if it actually happened for real, it'd be troubling. Anyway, I'll just put that thought aside for now. In any case, I must be vigilant to make sure Haruaki-kun doesn't get seduced by bad girls. My most important mission is to prevent impure and immoral behavior...!)

Konoha renewed her determination while nodding in sync with the chopping sounds on the cutting board. Suddenly she wondered why Haruaki had not returned yet and listened carefully—

From the entryway came the sounds of an agitated voice as well as laughter of someone who did not mind that tone of voice, followed by the sound of the main door closing. Next came several seconds of silence. A patter of footsteps approached the kitchen.

"K-Kono-nee! What a disaster!"

"What's the matter—Haruaki-kun? Oh I know. Is the souvenir so amazing that it completely overturned your expectations?"

"No, that's no what I mean... Or maybe it does count... A-Anyway, it's terrible, okay!?"

His anxious voice came from behind again. How odd? To be honest, what could be so serious?

Feeling intrigued, Konoha looked back. In the next second, the kitchen knife slid and fell out of her hand.

Of course, Haruaki was standing before her eyes with a most displeased look.

"Just as you can see, Old Pops' souvenir is—"

While pointing at the entity behind him, he spoke shocking words.

"—I can't believe he brought a child home."

Standing there was a young girl with long, sleek, black hair.

Expressionless, no emotions could be seen on her face. On her petite body, her petite head nodded slightly. Then in an extremely vague tone of voice, she said:

"...I'm Ningyohara Kuroe. Nice to meet you."

Part 2

In any case, Konoha decided to ask about the details while having dinner in the living room. After handing this "souvenir" over to Haruaki, Honatsu had apparently gone off to travel to somewhere else—Hence, having prepared food for three people ended up being just right in a certain sense.

"I think I understand the basic situation now. Simply stated, I'll just treat it as having a new junior, right?"

"Speaking of which, that Old Pops always does things so suddenly, every single time..."

"..."

Past Haruaki's sighing face, Konoha took a secret glance at the girl who was sipping tea after dinner—Kuroe.

The first impression she gave off was a girl that was difficult to read. Expressionless, it was impossible to tell what she was thinking inside. Even when spoken to, she did not smile, to the point of seeming like she was keeping people at a distance... However, she did answer quietly. Konoha decided to treat her behavior as shyness for now.

Although Konoha still did not quite get Kuroe's personality, at least she was able to gain a full understanding of the situation through the current conversation. Kuroe was here due to being a cursed doll. Her goal was the same as Konoha's—to lift her curse. Namely, by doing things beneficial for humans to neutralize the negative thoughts and feelings branded on her being, even including getting used to the human world and becoming more human. Same, it was completely the same.

Calling her a junior was completely right. Hence, seeing as she was shy, Konoha hoped to break the ice between them sooner. However—

"Uh... Well then, let's get along together from now on, Kuroe-san. I'll show you to your room later. My room is just next door. If there's anything you're not sure of, please feel free to ask me any time."

Although Konoha smiled while speaking to her, Kuroe remained expressionless as always. Without even putting on a smile of courtesy, she simply fluttered her eyes once—

"...Thank you. Let's get along... Muramasa-san."

She had given quite a displeasing response, although one could hardly blame her for that.

"Cough cough—Could you please call me Konoha? I don't quite like my family name."

"Really? Then lemme call ya Konoha-san..."

Although Konoha still found Kuroe acting reserved, impatience would not help. Hence, she brought up a different topic for a change of mood.

"Oh, you speak using a dialect?"

"...Not allowed?"

"No, of course it's allowed. It's also very cute. But, uh—Rather, I'm just very interested in where you were staying before coming here."

"Before coming here..."

Kuroe placed her teacup on the table. Still sitting formally in seiza, she looked up slightly and stared blankly at the ceiling. After a short while, she narrowed her eyes as though recalling something—

"Before this, I was at the home of a certain old man who lived very very far away from this place. That man loved me like a granddaughter. Because I am a doll, he treated me by playing with me in that way."

"..."

Konoha regretted picking the wrong topic. However, Kuroe did not stop speaking calmly, leaving no chance for Konoha to interject.

"Every day went by for me completely the same. Time seemed to stand still. However, time did not actually stop. I cursed my owner and had no choice but to curse him. Every night, I absorbed life force from my owner's body, causing him to deteriorate in health—"

Wah! Ha! Ha! Ha!

Abrupt laughter suddenly filled the living room, causing Kuroe to stop talking. The television had switched on. Putting the remote on the table, Haruaki, who had been silent all this time, said impatiently:

"...Oh, sorry. I happen to have a TV show I wanted to watch."

"Yes—Anyway, that's pretty much it."

"I-I see, I basically understand now. Thank you for the explanation, Kuroe-san."

After listening to Kuroe, Konoha breathed a sigh of relief. Glancing at Haruaki's profile, she thought to herself again, "what a considerate child." This made her feel quite happy.

A few minutes later, the three of them were still silently watching a comedy show. But when the commercial break came, Haruaki suddenly stood up, looked over at Konoha and said:

"By the way, the corridor lightbulb looks like it's reaching the end of its life. I want it replaced before I forget—Kono-nee, could you help me out? I can't reach it."

"Eh? ...Oh okay. Kuroe-san, no need to get up, please sit here for as long as you like."

No response. She simply stared at the television without saying a word. Seeing her like this, Konoha really did not feel like leaving Kuroe alone, but still, she followed Haruaki to the corridor. At a spot some distance away from the living room—

"Okay, you wanted to tell me something, right? Because the corridor lightbulb was replaced not too long ago."

"Ah... I don't really know if I should say this or not..."

Haruaki stopped walking and turned to face Konoha again, scratching his head awkwardly. While searching for the right words, he continued:

"Actually, it's nothing major, really."

"Okay."

"That girl, umm... How should I put this...? Isn't she... quite gloomy? That's quite worrying since we have to live under the same roof from now on... No, uh—it's hard for me to get along with her. It'd be great if she could get used to this home sooner."

"Yes."

Konoha smiled spontaneously. She knew roughly what Haruaki was trying to express but she did not want to interrupt him. This was because she hoped to lengthen this gentle time of contact with him.

"So... Kono-nee, I'm relying on you regarding that girl. You're both girls, so it's definitely easier to talk compared to me. Umm... I hope you'll do your best to get along in harmony with her..."

"Very well, I understand."

Konoha answered immediately. This was only natural.

Because he was asking her for help, there was nothing more gratifying than that.

"It goes without saying, right? I will try everything I can to make friends with her. Leave it to me."

"R-Really? Then I'm relieved... No, don't get the wrong idea, Kono-nee! I don't feel anything special about that girl, it's just that if the mood at home gets bad, life will be difficult for me!"

"Yes yes yes, I get it. Ufufu."

"W-Why are you laughing?"

"Eh? I was born like this, because 'always facing others gently with a smile' is my personal motto. Very well, let's get back now that the conversation is over. The commercial break is about to end. You really wanted to watch that show, right? Ufufu."

"O-Okay. You're still laughing, what's the matter..."

"I was born this way."

With a displeased expression, he returned to the living room, trudging with slow and heavy steps.

Naturally, his attitude only served to make Konoha smile even more.

Back to the living room, Kuroe was still staring at the television in exactly the same posture as before. Konoha sat down together with Haruaki and spoke to Kuroe in a relaxed tone of voice. Getting along harmoniously had to start with dialogue after all.

"Sorry for leaving you alone, we're done now... By the way, Kuroe-san, I just noticed. You don't need to sit so formally in seiza. Because this is basically your home now, it's fine if you wanna sit in a more relaxed posture."

"...Really? Then I'll sit in a more relaxed posture."

Kuroe still spoke expressionlessly. Next, she stood up with agility and skipped forward. Resting her back against the pillar that was nearby, she sat down again with her knees drawn up to her chest.

"...Puh!?"

Instantly, Haruaki made a strange noise. Intrigued, Konoha looked at Haruaki to see him turning his head away with an unnatural look on his

face. He was also deliberately avoiding Kuroe with his gaze. Tilting her head in puzzlement, Konoha wondered "How odd, what happened?" then she suddenly discovered the reason. From her position, she could not see from this angle, but since Kuroe was sitting in a skirt with her knees up, from Haruaki's perspective, there was nothing more—

—terrible than his angle.

This was absolutely a bad influence in his education!

"P-Please excuse my rudeness—!"

Konoha reached out as though performing a slide as a baserunner and rushed towards the tatami floor, pushing Kuroe's knees towards the side and forcing her to switch to sitting with her legs sideways. As Kuroe looked down with an expressionless "...?"—

"Although I said you could sit in a more relaxed posture, I would be happier if you paid a little more attention...!"

"...What?"

Kuroe cocked her head expressionlessly. Did she really not notice? Konoha glanced at Haruaki on the side who was still blushing and averting his gaze.

"Basically, if you sit like you were just now, how should I put this? Umm... Your p-p-pan..."

"Oh~ You mean panties?"

Without any feminine delicacy, Kuroe nodded in response while readily uttering that particular term. It looked like she finally understood what Konoha was trying to convey. However, she still said nonchalantly:

"...But it's fine. My panties won't be seen."

"H-How is that possible? Given the angle, from the front..."

As much as Konoha wanted to refute, she was interrupted by Kuroe's unbelievable words.

"Because my underwear is... a fundoshi."^[6]

A term transcending Konoha's comprehension. Hence, Konoha asked in return:

"...Eh?"

Konoha looked up at Kuroe's face, staring intently as Kuroe's lips moved seriously.

"FU. N. DO. SHI."

Strangely enough, even as Konoha watched Kuroe mouth the syllables one by one, she still heard the same term. Hence, Konoha asked again:

"...Eh?"

This time, she turned to look at Haruaki. Although Haruaki was still looking away, his head seemed to be nodding slightly.

In any case, Konoha did not dare ask again. Hence, she smiled and said:

"...Please excuse my rudeness."

In order to confirm the contradiction between her common sense and reality, Konoha simply lifted Kuroe's skirt to have a look.

Frighteningly—

Kuroe was not lying.

Part 3

"Then here's the washroom. The tissue supply is kept on the top shelf here. It's okay to replace it on your own whenever it runs out."

"...Yes."

"Then let's head over to the next destination. Uh—Here's an empty room... Oh, by the way, I'll need to bring the futon over to the accessory dwelling where you'll be living. The futons are kept in this room's cupboard. We'll come over here again just before we head over to the accessory dwelling."

"...Yes."

Dozens of minutes later, Konoha was walking with Kuroe through the corridor, giving her a rough idea of the home environment. On the other hand, Haruaki had already returned to his room.

Konoha resolved to stop thinking about the matter just now. It was just ordinary underwear, just ordinary underwear! Do not discriminate others just because of something like that, it's so trivial it's not anything worth getting bothered about at all.

"So anyway... That used to be something very commonplace, there's really no reason to be concerned about it at all..."

"Are you talking about my underwear, Konoha-san?"

"Wah, d-did I say it out loud?"

Kuroe nodded. Konoha was originally planning to play dumb... But perhaps this was actually a good opportunity instead since she was currently at the stage of trying to find conversation topics. Perhaps by starting with an unexpected topic, this could be the chance to establish better relations. After all, Haruaki had asked her to become good friends with Kuroe, so as long as there was any opportunity to improve their friendship, Konoha was going to take the challenge—

"Uh—Well, you're right. I did feel a bit surprised, but on further thought, there's nothing unusual about it. For example, I used to wear it too in the past... If I tried to search seriously, I might actually find one in a corner of my room somewhere. That's because I have a bad habit of being reluctant to throw old clothing away..."

"You cherish things."

"Y-Yeah, I guess I was born with a bit of a pauper's mentality."

Konoha was a little pleased that the conversation could continue. At this moment, the fact that the topic was on fundoshi did not matter.

"So... This is purely my personal curiosity, so I just want to ask. Kuroe-san, why do you wear fundoshi instead of panties? Do you insist on it as your personal choice?"

"Should I call it personal choice...? Simply because of this."

While she was saying that, at the same time—

"—Hwah!?"

Konoha felt a surprising touch on her bottom.

Not only that, it was also performed with two hands, groping mercilessly.

Groping left, groping right.

"K-Kuroe-san!"

Konoha frowned and looked back, thinking "What are you doing brainlessly? No matter how tolerant, anyone would blow up in this kind of situation, right?" However, standing behind her, Kuroe continued to reach forward with both hands, posture unchanged—

"...?"

She was even tilting her head in puzzlement. No, wait. Don't get angry, we must become good friends. Because it's his request. That's right, she must have other reasons for doing this—Hence, Kuroe forced a courteous smile and said:

"W-What are you doing?"

"...I wanted to explain the reason for wearing a fundoshi. Fundoshi has an effect of firming butts and preventing them from sagging. Wearing them works in beautifying the butt, so that's why I'm wearing it."

"I-I see... But then again, why are you groping my butt..."

"No, by the time I wanted to explain I was already very conc—Nothing."

"Why are you breaking off your sentence so unnaturally, i-impossible?"

Kuroe cast her gaze to the side. Konoha frantically reached to feel her round bottom. She could not feel it herself. Although she could not feel it, was it actually sagging? Which was why Kuroe spontaneously reached out to touch and confirm? Although Konoha had been self-conscious about her butt seeming a bit large since a long time ago, but no way...!

"I've no right to say anything, but I believe that you'll look great in a fundoshi, Konoha-san... Rather, it might be very dangerous if you don't wear one."

"You whispered something quietly just now! R-Really? It'll be very dangerous? Seriously?"

"I didn't say anything, but..."

Kuroe's gaze was originally turned away but now shifted back slowly.

She remained expressionless as usual, except when saying those words directly, she seemed to add some slightly pleading emotion—

"But... If you wear the same underwear as me, Konoha-san, I might feel a bit happy about it."

"..."

Very well, I'll consider it.

For the sake of becoming friends with her.

Also, due to the secret worry that just started.

At this point, what would be the most effective solution?

The next day, it was Sunday morning.

Haruaki seemed to be staying in his room, studying or something. Having obtained his permission, Konoha intended to clean up the main residence together with Kuroe. This was also to help her get used to the home sooner.

"Mmmhmm... E-Excuse me. Kuroe-san, do you have experience in cleaning?"

"...Yes."

"R-Really? Then there shouldn't be anything I need to teach you in particular, right? I'll be responsible for the corridor, Kuroe-san, so why don't you start cleaning up the living room."

"...Got it."

Kuroe obediently entered the living room. Konoha twisted her hips awkwardly as she walked in the corridor, sweeping the floorboards with a broom.

(I-It still feels weird. I think... I should give up on this...)

Her lower body felt a little exposed although one part was extremely tight. Under her skirt, a normally covered part was coming into contact with the outside air while another part was wrapped up more tightly than usual.

"Ah, what a large piece of trash... Wah...!"

When bending over to pick up trash, her exposed buttocks were rubbing against her skirt's fabric, resulting in an unexpected sensation. Konoha was not sure if it was a ticklish feeling or embarrassment due to the sense of vulnerability... No, that's not right. I shouldn't feel ashamed. This is simply the traditional fundoshi. It's just a fundoshi I easily found in my room. In order to improve my figure, thinking "I'll just try it for a day..." There's nothing wrong with this at all. Furthermore, regarding this underwear, I even told her discreetly that "...we're wearing the same thing" and she seemed a little happy. In order to improve our relations, this is a very effective measure.

"Hya... Ooh..."

The sense of vulnerability suddenly hit her again when she least expected. Nevertheless, Konoha endured, twisting her body as she continued sweeping. Since Haruaki was most likely studying in his room, she took particular care to be more quiet outside his room. After sweeping the area in front of Haruaki's room and just as she was about to walk through the corridor again, Konoha sensed a strange and subtle feeling. Like an insect flying through the air—Air flowing, a mild turbulence. During the instant when she was feeling intrigued—

"Kyah!"

Konoha felt something entangle her ankle, causing her to fall over forwards in the corridor. If walking normally, she would have been able to protect herself while breaking her fall, but today, she was preoccupied with sweeping and her lower body sensations. Although her face did not strike the floor of the corridor directly, the impact on her bosom from her own body weight hurt quite a bit.

"W-What happened...?"

Still lying on the floor, Konoha turned to look back. In that instant, she felt like she saw something like a black string suddenly vanish around the corridor's corner—But she decided to ignore that for now. Because she saw something even more important, or rather, her eyes met with the other person's.

"That should be my line, Kono-nee...! W-Why are you...?"

Perhaps on his way to the washroom, Haruaki just happened to come out from his room. With eyes filled with fear, he was looking straight towards her, looking at Konoha on the floor, skirt lifted up, thighs exposed, even the

special underwear she was wearing—And because of that underwear's design, her completely exposed buttocks.

He gulped hard. Licking his lips several times as though unsure whether he should ask, he quietly turned his gaze aside and said:

"Kono-nee... Why are you wearing... a fundo—"

"Please stop talking—! Th-This, uh—Just pretend you never saw it!"

Later on, Konoha returned to the living room.

Having finished cleaning, Kuroe was sitting blankly on the tatami floor, writing something in a notebook in her hand. After noticing Konoha's return, she casually placed the notebook into her pocket.

"...Welcome back. This side's all cleaned up now."

"I-Is that so... I'd like to ask you something. Have you been staying here all this time?"

"Of course."

Still expressionless, Kuroe answered calmly without anything strange in her behavior. Hence, Konoha wondered in head-tilted puzzlement, "Am I getting old, falling over in a place without any obstacles?"—And as luck would have it, right in full view of Haruaki. She had no choice but to blame her own poor fortune.

Part 4

After lunch, it was afternoon.

Konoha did not know if Haruaki intended to leave Kuroe to her for now, but he was shutting himself in his room again. Although it felt a bit lonely, it could not be helped.

Just as Konoha was wondering what to do next, Kuroe suddenly spoke emphatically in the middle of watching television:

"Life must be tough... for people with large boobs."

"E-Eh? Why are you suddenly talking about that? What do you mean, life must be tough... Although it is true that they do weigh quite substantially."

Kuroe's sleepy eyes turned to look at Konoha's bust.

"...Weight. In other words, the downward force of gravity. Even beings like us cannot ignore that physical law of nature. So bit by bit, bit by bit, it'll lower... and lower... Isn't that so?"

"H-Heeee~ P-Please don't say something so inauspicious, okay!? It'll be fine, probably."

The frightening word of "sagging" flashed across Konoha's mind again.

Next, Kuroe approached Konoha while maintaining a kneeling posture.

"May I help you confirm? Perhaps I can help."

"By confirm... You mean touching? Umm, I think that's quite embarrassing..."

"Don't worry, we're both girls. There's nothing to be concerned about."

She was not incorrect but the embarrassment was still real.

However—This was a skinship opportunity she was proposing on her own initiative. Skinship, that was a word meaning the improvement of mutual relations, right? Perhaps by casting her shame away in trying to wear a fundoshi, some progress had been made. In that case, this chance must not be missed, to further improve their relations—Konoha instantly concluded.

"G-Got it. Well then, umm—Please be gentle."

"You can count on me."

Kuroe reached directly forward to touch Konoha's breasts. Her movements were very light, very light, like trying to use her tiny hands to cover them, as though confirming that smooth curvature.

"Hmm... W-What do you think?"

"Oh, this—maybe... a little worrying..."

"W-What do you mean by a little worrying? Impossible... umm... sagging...!"

"Relax. I know a massage technique that can adjust the shape. Like this."

The movements of her hands became slightly different. Not just touching gently but also applying some force on occasion. Pushing the two bulges closer and lifting up, then shaking her fingertips... Was what Konoha expected, but Kuroe proceeded to make them jump in her palms—

"Hmm... Does this really... work...?"

"Of course it works. My past owner was an expert in massages and taught me many techniques... Ahhh, I believe that if you could learn to massage yourself, Konoha-san, that'll be even better. Lemme teach you and you can try it out."

Grabbing Konoha's wrists, Kuroe overlapped their hands together to slowly move Konoha's palms.

"Like this, massaging inwards in a spiral motion. Yes yes yes, excellent. Then I'll release my hands now and you can try on your own... See, isn't your body beginning to feel warm? It means that the fat is shifting slightly, you're massaging quite well."

"Although I don't quite understand... Hmm, like... this?"

"Yes. You don't need to answer me. Just concentrate, close your eyes and imagine. Once you become familiar with the massaging, you can apply more force, focus on imagining... Massaging...!"

"O-Okay. Here I go—"

"..."

"Hmm... Guh... How's that? Like this... Am I getting the hang of it...?"

"..."

"Please watch carefully and tell me if I'm doing it wrong... Is pressing like this okay? Or would it be better if I do it more like this...?"

"..."

"—Eh?"

Konoha suddenly realized there had been no response for a while and opened her eyes.

Kuroe was not present in the living room. Instead, someone else was watching.

Feeling her entire body go stiff, Konoha wondered, if someone saw what she was doing without knowing the full story—What would they think?

To be frank, she had put a lot of effort into massaging. She also followed Kuroe's instructions and concentrated, putting effort into massaging to make the shape prettier. With her eyes closed, both hands firmly pressed against her breasts, she had massaged singlemindedly with full effort.

But her behavior—

Had been witnessed by Haruaki who had started standing at the living room doorway at some point in time.

"K-Kono-nee...?"

"Wah! Y-You've misunderstood, this is... simply a massage!"

"D-Don't you worry! I didn't see anything! Honestly, so... Umm—Sorry!"

Haruaki ran away and Konoha could immediately hear the paper door to his room sliding shut. Then just as the thought of "to think that he would happen to see that embarrassing scene" crossed her mind and she collapsed onto her hands against the tatami floor in dejection, Konoha saw that Kuroe had somehow reappeared. She was sitting in seiza by the table, writing something in her notebook again and nodding lightly to herself.

"Kuroe...san, where were you... just now...?"

"Oh sorry."

Expressionlessly, she shut the notebook and pointed to the tray on the table.

"I saw you were sweating, Konoha-san, and thought you needed a cold drink. But opening the fridge on my own felt a bit impolite but I didn't want to disturb you either, Konoha-san, so I went over to call the boy and ask him what I should do."

Hearing Kuroe's explanation, many feelings of dissonance surfaced in Konoha's mind.

Calling him over on purpose? So that was why he happen to witness the scene. This was almost as though it was calculated for him to see. Besides, whether that type of massaging was actually effective... However~ Konoha could only blame herself for listening to Kuroe so easily.

And what was she writing in that notebook? How suspicious. There must be something suspicious inside.

But at this moment, Konoha deliberately stopped pondering and shook her head.

(No no no... I'm overthinking things. Suspecting someone without evidence would be far too impolite. Besides, that sort of thing can't be possible, right?)

Konoha wanted very much to become friends with her, so she should be able to sense that wish. Konoha could not recall doing anything to displease Kuroe. If she were playing a prank, she would not deliberately do something like this. So it must be coincidence. Everything was an unfortunate coincidence. Definitely beyond a doubt—

As much as Konoha tried to convince herself, she could not dispel that feeling of dissonance in her mind no matter what. Konoha kept staring at Kuroe, who tilted her head and said at this time:

"You're progressing rapidly with that massage so there's probably nothing more I can teach you. Also, I hope I didn't act out of line by bringing this out of goodwill."

"No... Nothing of that sort. Thank you very much..."

Konoha found her own expression a bit stiff but still tried hard to return a smile as she accepted the barley tea from the tray.

However, Kuroe's eyes remained emotionless.

For some reason, looking into her eyes gave Konoha a feeling like she was being treated as a laboratory animal—In other words, like being observed in secret, hence there was a strange sense of discomfort.

Part 5

Late that night, when all was quiet, Konoha was lying in bed in her own room.

"Sigh..."

While sighing, Konoha also closed the paperback she was reading in bed. She was not registering any of the content at all. Looking at the clock, she

discovered it was already considered late night. Back in the main residence, he was probably asleep already?

"Ah... I should get ready for a bath..."

Konoha slowly stood up and started to fill the tub in the adjoined bathroom. Watching the hot water pour and splash, Konoha sighed again.

Naturally, her mind was occupied with Kuroe. Konoha really wanted to trust her. But despite wanting to trust her, there was still a sense of dissonance. Fundoshi, falling over at a seemingly calculated moment and even witnessed by him. Breast massage. Then his appearance at a seemingly calculated time, also happening to witness the sight.

"If it were not coincidence... Then sure enough, that child deliberately planned it all as a prank...?"

If that were the case, then her intentions were unknown. Konoha had already reflected deeply a number of times, concluding that she should not have offended Kuroe in some way. Besides, neither of them knew each other well enough to foster dislike. In that case, why was she playing such pranks—

At this moment, Konoha suddenly realized something. Pranks were literally malicious games.^[7] In other words, playing a game. From the word "game," Konoha thought of one possibility.

(She doesn't know the "rules of the game"...?)

Konoha recalled Kuroe's calm voice when she recounted her past residence.

Hence, Konoha wondered if it was really like that.

I can easily tell just by reminiscing about my own past self.. Before coming to this home, we all existed to curse someone. We did not have the leisure to cultivate an interest in games. Plus the fact that she's a doll—speaking of which, rather than "an existence that played," she would be "an existence others played with" instead. Hence, it would be as she mentioned at that time.

(So, starting yesterday, Haruaki-kun, who cannot be cursed, became her owner. It's the first time for her to obtain freedom, but suddenly confronted with such a situation, she might be a loss as to how to exercise that freedom...)

That was a possible explanation. But come to think of it, there was no definite evidence that could prove that she was playing pranks intentionally. Even if there was evidence, in light of Haruaki-kun asking me to be friends with her, I can't get angry at her or get into an argument—

"Hmm..."

Agonizing repeatedly over the same problem, Konoha felt quite stifled.

Reaching into the half-filled bathtub, Konoha began to stir nonstop. However, this did not succeed in dispelling the stress in her heart. Whatever, I'll just go to sleep immediately after a bath and figure the rest out tomorrow. That's right, worrying like this won't help anything. Rather, relaxing my mood might perhaps allow me to think of a good solution. Let me have a good soak in the bath and stop wearing this tightly wrapped fundoshi (I just find myself weird this morning) and switch to the panties I wear normally. The mornings have been getting cold recently, so let me add another blanket to keep myself warm during sleep—

(Oh, by the way, I still haven't taken the standby blanket to that child... I should go check on her and bring a blanket while I'm at it. It'd be troublesome if she caught a cold.)

Hence, Konoha shut off the hot water and went to find a blanket in the room's cupboard. She recalled that there was a slightly smaller blanket, different from the one she wanted for herself.

"Hmm~ For a petite child, this should be just right... I hope she's not asleep already."

Hence, holding the blanket, she left her room. Standing in the outdoor passageway, she huddled in the cold as she knocked lightly on Kuroe's room next door. She rubbed her cheeks to put on a natural smile while waiting for the door to open. However, there was no response so she knocked again.

"Kuroe-san, are you already asleep? I'm worried you might be cold so I've brought you another blanket."

There was still no response. What should she do? Hence, Konoha tried to turn the door handle—The door opened. What should she do? In any case, if Kuroe was asleep, then she would just leave the blanket beside her. That way, Kuroe could just pick it up and cover herself if she felt cold.

"I'll just enter for a moment..."

Konoha entered and closed the door lightly. Naturally, it was completely dark inside the room, but for a non-human like Konoha, that did not pose any hindrance. This room, the size of six tatami mats, yet to be completely furnished, was bare, of course. While thinking "despite having the same internal layout as my room, the feeling is quite different" to herself, Konoha walked over to Kuroe's futon in the center of the room—

The blanket, originally held in her arms, fell to the floor.

The futon was like an empty and discarded shell.

Furthermore, the girl who was supposed to be sleeping inside, had run off somewhere currently—

However, Konoha instinctively deduced the answer.

Part 6

Feeling a weight on top of his body, Haruaki woke up. Reluctant to leave his sweet dreams, he opened his sleepy eyes. But instantly, his consciousness became wide awake.

Blue-white moonlight was shining into the slightly dim room. The image illuminated was that of a young girl, sitting astride his body, having pulled his blanket away—Ningyohara Kuroe.

"Hi... Dear master."

"W-What...?"

She was smiling. Smiling she looked down towards him. This was the first smile she displayed ever since arriving at this home.

For some reason, it felt quite scary.

"Ah... Hmm... Umm, you don't really need to call me master or anything like that. No really, more importantly, this is my room, umm, anyway, please get down first—"

"Let's not worry over such trivial things."

She leaned her entire body forwards, bringing her face close. Her long hair was tickling his face and Haruaki could even feel the breaths she exhaled.

Breathing so near, blowing at him. Logically speaking, pushing her away should be a simple task, but for some reason, his body could not move at all.

"Come play with me."

"P-Play with you...?"

Kuroe smiled even more radiantly and lightly shook her body. Once again, Haruaki felt that presence—the body weight of the petite girl sitting on top of him.

"That's right, let's play. Playing a very fun and pleasurable... game."

Haruaki heard his own throat making a loud noise in the room. Trembling while he spoke, Haruaki tried to cover up that sound.

"Th-That wouldn't be good... No."

"Why? Aren't you at an age when you want to play, master...?"

She did not avert her gaze. She did not move her watery eyes away.

"I'm the one who suggested playing, so there's no need for you to suppress yourself. There must be many games you've always wanted to play but were never able to, right? Right now, come with me and play those games together...!"

"H-Hold on! Wait up! Why... Why are you doing this?"

Answering the question he asked with great vexation was her whispers by his ear—Almost too soft to hear, but as though biting his ear lightly.

"The answer is simple... Because I only know how to play this type of game."

"Eh—"

"Okay, no need to speak anymore. If you're scared, just leave everything to me... Let's play... A secret belonging only to the two of us... A game...!"

The two of them stared silently at each other for quite a number of seconds.

After a brief moment, Haruaki's fingers, clutching his blanket, twitched. Then his hand was slowly, slowly lifted up over the futon—

"—Vile wench, reveal thyself."

Just as the paper door was forcefully opened, Haruaki heard that voice at the same time.

That voice, sounding as though someone was suppressing the fury in their heart, yet so calm that it was frightening to the extreme—

"K-Kono-nee...?"

Haruaki's entire body was frozen. Apart from that, there was nothing he could do.

Konoha was simply standing at the doorway. While pushing up her glasses, she smiled and stared at Kuroe who was straddling Haruaki's body that was lying down.

She was definitely mad indeed.

Haruaki did not know if Kuroe was aware of that, but still sitting on Haruaki's body, she said:

"What are you doing at the door? It's very cold outside."

"An utterly foolish question. Thou shalt say no more..."

Even her former manner of speech had returned. This was proof that she had already gone over her limit.

"I am prepared to instruct this foolish girl the rules she ought to obey in this residence... That wanton body shall be schooled directly! Thou shalt become warm in nary an instant, worry not! Kukuku!"

Consequently, a thought occurred to Haruaki.

He could only think of one thing.

This was the end.

Part 7

Konoha and Kuroe were facing off in the garden beneath the moonlight. Haruaki was about to descend from the veranda to the garden but—

"K-Kono-nee...!"

"Thou art dismissed. I shall deal with thee shortly after."

His legs stopped as though frozen by fear. After throwing a glance at him, the demon sword inhaled. As though deliberately showing off towards Kuroe before her, she curled her lips in a grin.

"What didst thou say? ...Hoping for us to become close friends? Very well. A request for me? Of course, enchanted to hear you out. A junior? Granted that is true, no mistake. Simply ignorant of the rules of the game? Understandable. Ahhh~ Of course I know. I should get along with thee in harmony. Be that as it may, allow me to inform thee—What do I care? Because thou hast erred in a manner I cannot tolerate."

As though responding to Konoha, Kuroe also curled her lips boldly.

"Lemme ask just in case. If I prostrate myself and beg for mercy right now, will you forgive me?"

"Kuhaha. Young girl, art thou attempting to kill me with laughter? Truth be told, that would be a shrewd plan..."

While emitting evil light from her pupils, Konoha lowered her stance slightly. Waving her karate chop lightly, she symbolically slashed the moon apart. Then approaching step by step, she said even more explosive words:

"—Thou reliest on nothing but tricks of that level to defeat me!?"

"If that really is my only choice, then I'll put more serious effort into making you laugh."

Faced with Konoha closing in, Kuroe swiftly retreated to distance herself. However, Konoha was charging as fast as the speed of her sword-drawing. Instantly, she rushed at Kuroe and chopped with her hand. When Kuroe bent forward to evade the attack, the laundry pole behind her was cleanly sliced into two.

"How now? Thou only fleest in desperation? Thy life shall be spared, thou wouldst do well to hold still!"

"No way, I don't really like the feeling of pain."

Just as Konoha was about to unleash a kicking move, as sharp as blades, towards Kuroe who had her knees bent—Kuroe's hair began to squirm. Many bundles of hardened hair rushed up towards Konoha from below,

entangling her legs and waist like vines. The Japanese sword went "Hmm" and frowned. Immediately, Kuroe made the tips of her remaining hair as sharp as spears, sending them flying towards Konoha whose legs were immobilized. However—

"I... see... Ah—hah!"

Konoha bent over and twisted her limbs. Just as a sound of tearing fabric was heard, she performed a back flip. Jumping power, the swinging of her knife hand and the blade properties imbued in her thighs—By making full use of those three elements, she severed all of Kuroe's hair. Regaining her freedom, Konoha distanced herself a couple of steps more while facing off against Kuroe. Smiling proudly, she said:

"How interesting, such child's play. Not bad, not bad. Complete nonresistance would be too boring."

"...Just in case, let me remind you: it's completely exposed."

Still expressionless all this time, Kuroe was staring at Konoha's lower body. Due to struggling free by force, her skirt had already turned into numerous scraps of tattered cloth, scattered all over the garden. Konoha took a glance at her exposed lower half and stood firmly with her legs apart, as though making a display of her traditional underwear, scoffing as she spoke:

"The flesh feeleth tightly bound, making movements rather easy... Rather, a majority of my lifetime has been spent without undergarments. Nevertheless, that is neither here nor there."

"Rather than tight... I think it's more correct to say it's buried into the flesh."

"..."

"Another word of advice, this is the second time for the master behind you to get a full view of your fundoshi, buried into the flesh of your butt."

Konoha's eyebrow twitched. Then she took a step forward.

"...Thou darest to call him master, how unbearably infuriating. Naturally, I am filled with wrath for thy part in showing my embarrassment to him. Thou even goest as far as to offer thy body in an attempt to seduce him, it angereth me to the point of making me laugh. Ahhh, ultimately, all I can say is... How infuriating!"

"But it's absolutely true that he's my master. Why do you have to be so angry...? Hmm, could it be that... something like this? 'That person belongs to me alone, I won't allow you to approach him, you temptress!' That's the impression you're giving me—"

"—Silence, lowly swine!"

Konoha was exuding an even stronger aura of murderous intent. Legs exposed, Konoha kicked the ground and charged again. Kuroe did not resign herself to death. While moving, she attempted to distance herself while casually extending her hair. Konoha severed the entangling hair that flew like spears. Using a forward kick to open up a hole in the hair that was spread out like a net, she broke through. Using their various powers to approach and engage in battle, the two girls were locked in a struggle—

However, this could not last indefinitely. After all, a simple fact was enough to decide who held the upper hand.

Kuroe was a doll while Konoha was a sword. A toy and a weapon. An object created to soothe and heal people versus an object created to kill. The difference lay in their natural gap in capabilities.

Faced with Kuroe whose motions were gradually slowing down from fatigue, the cursed demon blade was accelerating instead. It was as though she had finally recalled her manner of movement dating back to the nostalgic battlefield.

The final conclusion arrived effortlessly as Konoha passed through Kuroe's extended hair and closed in on the enemy's position. Trying to evade, Kuroe stumbled. Consequently, Konoha sat her entire weight down on Kuroe who had lost balance and fallen over. Before Kuroe's hair could extend, Konoha's knife hand was already pointed towards the tip of her nose.

Wearing nothing but a fundoshi, Konoha's lower body displayed voluptuous and slender thighs. The illuminating moonlight seemed to be praising them by emphasizing the seductive qualities of their pristine paleness. Konoha's body shook as she laughed while saying:

"Very well... The delightful deathmatch hath ended. What more wouldst thou say? Thou shalt be screaming hereon, hence speak thy mind first."



"Sure enough, I lost huh... Hmm, I do have something to ask you."

Pinned to the ground, Kuroe's expression remained unchanged. Expressionlessly, she looked up at Konoha who was sitting astride her body.

"Uh—Simply stated, same question as previous. Why are you so angry—?"

Konoha twisted her expression with annoyance and pushed her knife hand forward a few centimeters.

"At death's door yet thy audacity remaineth...! Thou knowest not what thou hast done!? Thou toyest with me thus, finally sneaking into his bed, intending to engage in immoral behavior with him...!"

"So that's why you're angry?"

"Of course! Apart from that, what else is worth stoking mine anger!?"

"I... see... To be able to make you get seriously angry, this really means—"

Kuroe closed her eyes for an instant.

Then she continued, completely relaxed:

"As expected, you really do love that child."

"What of it!? I love him, so what...!"

Konoha frantically stopped herself halfway through as though saying "Oh no!" Then with an even more frightening gaze, she looked down at Kuroe who was pinned down under her.

Originally frowning, her brow relaxed.

Confounded, very confounded, Konoha looked down at Kuroe's expression.

She was smiling.

Displaying a truly innocent expression, Kuroe began to giggle.

"—Yes, all I wanted to her from you was that."

"Huh...?"

Konoha reacted sluggishly like a deflated ball. No longer expressionless, Kuroe frowned with an apologetic look and said:

"Uh—I don't know if apologizing now is too late, but as a matter of principle, let me say sorry to you—I've played many pranks, I apologize. I didn't do the things I did to trouble you or to insult you. Neither was I trying to seduce that child for real. So, I'm sorry."

"Wha..."

Speechless, Konoha's mind was occupied with only one thought.

Then why did she do all that? What was her goal?"

Perhaps sensing that question, Kuroe smiled again.

Rather than giggling, she smiled very radiantly.

Then in a casual tone of voice, she said:

"No really—It's because I just arrived and wanted to get along with you, my senior, as quickly as possible. Hence—You should already know, the fastest way to become close friends is probably through love stories, right?"

Part 8

"...Eh?"

Konoha could only respond in an idiotic kind of voice. What was this child saying?

"D-Did you just mention love stories?"

"Wow, your manner of speaking is back to normal. I'm saved... Anyway, yes, love stories indeed. But I believed that you won't tell me the truth if I asked you suddenly, but I hoped to become good friends with you as quickly as possible—So I drew up plans for a special mission, namely the 'make you agitated through pranks and jealousy, so as to get an honest answer while you're in a raging rampage' plan. Although sounding quite lame, it succeeded, hip hip hurray—Clap clap clap clap."

Since Kuroe's arms were immobilized, she could only say clap with her voice. Konoha swayed unsteadily, feeling her strength drained. What?

What was with this weird attitude? Where had the robotic, expressionless character gone off to?

"Until now... You've been pretending...?"

"Well, perhaps my acting skills were even more of a downer than usual. Apart from apologizing, let me take this opportunity to confess that I've lied about other things. Sorry. In my previous home, I served as a grandchild for a helpless old lady, playing with her and having a happy life. It's nothing like being 'ignorant of the rules of the game' that you just mentioned. This was actually a prank for the sake of my plan. It was quite fun too."

Feeling another wave of dizziness and fatigue, Konoha shook her head. At this moment, she discovered an object fallen beside Kuroe's cheek. It was the notebook that Kuroe had been writing who knows what inside. Coincidentally, it opened on a certain page, showing the words inside.

"...'Seeing the butt exposed by fundoshi: running away in panic. Seeing breast groping: running away in panic. Conclusion: an innocent youth, rare nowadays. Due to virtually the same reaction in both cases, impossible to tell if he's more into butts or boobs. More observation required'... W-What is this?"

"Uh—Not only you, but I also feel that it's necessary to build relations with that child. Hence... I'm simply collecting information about him. He really is a good boy."

"Sigh~..."

Konoha sighed hard. She really could not understand what this junior of hers was thinking. Except—She already understood that Kuroe did not mean anything malicious in this incident.

"So that's the reason behind everything. Will you forgive me?"

"Seriously, my anger has dissipated already from excessive surprise... Since you want to become good friends with us, you don't need to do these kinds of things. Just speaking your mind openly is fine..."

"Rather, I'd say that's too slow and not fun at all. Take a serious battle like this, it ends with both sides acknowledging each other... The kind of relationship that's written as 'rivals' but read as 'friends'! Besides, if our relationship progresses to the point of knowing each other's crushes, to be able to share love stories, isn't that invincible? Okay, come on and strike

while the iron is hot and share your love stories. Tell me when you met him? How did you come to start liking him?"

"Sigh, a relationship close enough to share love stories, on the other hand... I feel like I'm simply providing you with leverage over me, but am I worrying too much...?"

"You're overthinking things, worrying too much. I can be said to be the most reliable ally. If you need any help, I'll provide you with my assistance—"

"...Anyway, thanks but no thanks."

Konoha sighed again. Just as she got down and freed Kuroe. The sound of sudden footsteps could be heard approaching.

"K-Kono-nee..."

"Oh, Haruaki-kun."

"Umm, I hope... you can forgive her. She didn't do it maliciously. Uh—She said it herself, she doesn't know the rules of the game, that's why she did that kind of thing... So, just teach her other rules of the game and I think she won't do that again!"

With head-tilted puzzlement, Konoha wondered "teach her other rules of the game?" Haruaki continued to come forward, handing a small device over to Kuroe.

"I'm lending this to you. After all, I seldom play it nowadays."

"...?"

It was a handheld monochrome game device. Haruaki was not particular fond of videogaming, but he still owned a lot of consoles. This was one of them.

Without saying a word, Kuroe looked down at the game device. Soon after, she shifted her gaze towards Konoha. At this moment, the two girls burst out laughing at the same time.

"Yes, really—what a good child~"

"...Aren't I right? But his only shortcoming is being a little too simple and honest."

"W-What's going on, why are you two laughing? If you don't want it, fine, don't borrow it!"

"That's not it. Thank you. I'm really happy. I'm very into games but there were none in my previous home."

"I-I see."

Perhaps feeling embarrassed upon seeing Kuroe's honest smile, Haruaki immediately turned his face away, blushing a little. Seeing him react like that, Kuroe smiled intriguingly and whispered in his ear.

"Yes, so I'll gratefully borrow this from you... The game I proposed just now, let's save that for when you're more grown up."

"W-What?"

"Kuroe-san! Have you not learnt your lesson enough? Not allowed means not allowed!"

"Just kidding, I'm kidding, okay? On the other hand, it looks like I'll be able to learn many new games now. Also, there's a whole bunch of things I've always wanted to do but was unable... Hoho, I'd also like to check out many places by traveling around."

"...Once your curse is lifted, you can visit as many places as you want without any problems."

"Well said, let's do our best. I need to do things beneficial to humans... Hmm—What I'm capable of and also the most beneficial to people, what is it...?"

"Actually, you don't need to rush. Why not have fun in moderation, live life in moderation, and slowly lift your curse?"

"Yes. By the way, speaking of fun—How is this game played?"

"Oh right. Uh—Here's the power switch..."

It was a very strange scene.

Late at night in the garden, under the bright moonlight, a boy and a girl were staring at an old game device's tiny LCD screen.

Watching them quietly from the side, Konoha pondered.

Kuroe confessed to lying. But—what if that confession itself was a lie as well?

She had said that she served as the grandchild for an old lady who had no relatives and had a lot of fun. However, the fact of her being cursed was undeniable. No matter how much she wanted to serve as the old lady's grandchild, could a human really withstand a gradually weakening body? Could a human really refrain from cursing the culprit—the cursed doll? It looked like Kuroe had always been tormented by her own curse, unable to play or live happily. Hence it could be true that she did not know the rules of the game? Consequently, she arrived to this home with a desire for fun and games. That desire probably went out of control and manifested in the form of pranks and the love story plan—

Thinking to this point, Konoha shook her head lightly.

However, only Kuroe herself would know the actual truth of the matter. It was all in the past. No matter what kind of life she lived previously, she was now living here, in this home. That fact alone was enough... Hence, she should be free to relax and have fun. Konoha would simply step forward and teach her if she went out of line in her games. That was precisely the role she should play as the senior living in this home.

At this moment, Konoha found the other two saying: "...Your score is even lower than mine?" "I-I haven't played this for a long time, I'm just a little rusty...!" From the way Kuroe looked as Haruaki handed the game device to her, Haruaki must have been demonstrating to her earlier.

Then Kuroe slowly turned her face towards Konoha—

Smiling, she said:

"...Kono-san, do you wanna play together as well? Let's wager with juice and have a contest to see who gets the high score."

Konoha noticed that a syllable had been dropped from her name, but for some reason, it made her feel quite happy.

Konoha answered: "Of course, let's do it."

She knew that such an answer was quite lacking in common sense. They could very well play in the house. There was no need to game in the garden. Furthermore, it was almost midnight and there was nothing preventing them from playing the next day after a night's rest. However—

She felt that there was some kind of special value in playing with Kuroe in this particular instant, at this particular place.

That was the feeling she felt.

A very simple puzzle game started, involving clearing rows of falling blocks. Konoha had asked Haruaki many times to let her play in the past. Although the specific controls were now a bit fuzzy in her memory, she could still manage. Not long after she pressed the start key—

"Oh, Kono-san. There's one more thing I forgot to say."

"T-Talking to me right now, that's a bit cheating... Wah, the blocks are piling up...!"

"You can still recover, do your best. So actually, I also lied about something else."

"I'm no longer surprised by this point... What lie?"

"Yes. I was originally just pretending for fun yesterday, but I never thought you'd believe my lie, Kono-san, and start wearing it on your own. In other words—I don't usually wear fundoshi."

"Eh..."

Her confession itself was shocking enough, but there was an even more shocking truth.

Konoha realized. Rather, how did she fail to realize earlier?

Her lower body was currently exposed, only clad in a fundoshi—

Starting a while earlier, he had intentionally kept his gaze away.

"W-Why do I have to game under such conditions? T-Time out! I request a time out! Where do I press to pause the game? No wait, I don't mind forfeiting this match, switch the power—"

"Oh, that won't do—If you deliberately switch off the power or lose to forfeit the match, you'll need to be punished. Right... Let's use a youthful punishment game like 'yelling out the name of your crush towards the moon.' Please."

"H-How could I possibly do that... That's totally unreasonable! Deciding on the rules after the fact, that's completely underhanded!"

"The world of competitions is merciless like this."

Kuroe's sleepy eyes were almost closed due to her delighted mood. She was doing it on purpose. Picking this particular time to make her confession, it was definitely intentional. She was definitely enjoying this.

Suddenly, a hint of unease flashed through Konoha's mind. Regarding the three of them living together from now on.

Was it possible... That asking this child to have fun to her heart's content... How should one put it? Would it be as foolish as raising a lion and unleashing it on the streets...?

In the next few minutes, while enduring the cold night wind blowing against her butt, displaying eyes like that of a dead fish, Konoha continued to clear blocks in a robotic manner.

Afterword

Hello again, I am Minase. In Volume 7, I've done something different and I present a short story collection to everyone! This volume comprises the four stories serialized in the Dengeki Bunko Magazine as well as two newly written ones, plus the omake extras. These are all stories that don't relate much to the main series, but conversely, it does mean that it's actually okay to start reading from this volume... Or maybe not, necessarily... But no matter what, due to being serialized in the magazine, the contents are quite lighthearted and easy to understand, so I think everyone can read it without worrying.

However, since this is my first short story collection, I'm feeling a bit nervous. What exactly should I write for a SS collection's afterword...? No, exactly because it's a collection, there are things I can do! Hence, I've decided to be go with the cliché and write explanations and provide behind-the-scenes content. This might enter into spoiler territory, so readers who haven't read this volume's content yet, please be careful.

Hello Guillotine

The first serialized story, its provisional title was "Dog Story" (before editing). In terms of timeline, the story happened not long after Volume 2. A lowbrow conversation took place when choosing Guillotine's name. The editor (female) seemed particularly enthusiastic for some reason and this really left a deep impression on me. Also, the name "Rasputin" was originally going to be "Gestapo" but it was later changed because of worries that we'd be seen as Nazi supporters and offend Germans, even though this novel doesn't have a German version published.

Sunday is a Good Day for Stalking

In terms of publication order, this is actually the third story, but since it takes place between Volumes 2 and 3, its position was changed in this collection. This story tells about Shiraho's idiotic studious hardships and unwittingly ended up foreshadowing Volume 6. Even as the author, I didn't realize it back when writing the story. Also, I've never eaten Shawarma actually.

The First Shrine Festival / "A little reckoning day"

This was the second story to be serialized. From the fact that Kuroe appears, you can tell that it takes place after Volume 3. It's totally not an exaggeration to say that this story's true protagonist is Masked Lady D-Cup. I never expected this story to receive so much positive feedback, hoping she could make another appearance... This isn't decided yet.

School☆Wars ~Ningyohara Kuroe Is Not Bored~

The fourth serialized story. In terms of timeline, since this story mentions the cultural festival in its very first sentence, it happens after the events of Volume 5. It's a story I came up with to give Kuroe a chance to wear the school uniform. Back when it was published in the magazine, I even asked Sasorigatame-san to draw a wonderful Kuroe in school uniform for me. Everything went just as planned!

How to Tame Ueno Kirika

The first of the new stories. Class Rep almost never appears in the magazine stories, so I decided to write one with her as the focus. I had this idea from a long time ago that it'd be nice if such an outrageous cursed tool actually existed in the world. However, it's difficult to place within the main plot's atmosphere, so I took this opportunity to use it. Actually, it's very possible that similar tools might lie dormant in the Yachi home's storeroom.

A Certain Encountered Deathmatch

The second of the new stories. A side story about Haruaki in his middle school era. I personally think that one of the highlights is how Haruaki isn't totally boring and gives off a subtly fresh feeling... As well as the past Konoha who ended up wearing that after all...? As for the time background, it feels like the Nintendo Game Boy was probably bought by Honatsu. Also, since this story's title was stuck on suggesting "flashback" directly, I was totally agonizing over it. In the end, I got fed up and turned on the television for a change of mood. «A Certain Magical Index» happened to be broadcasting so I ended up with this kind of title. Of course, Kamachi-san's permission was neither sought nor obtained!

Anyway, so that's pretty much the feeling for these six stories. A different style compared to the main series. I'll be very happy if everyone enjoyed reading them.

Finally, I'd like to thank the editor in charge, Kawamoto-san, and the illustrator, Sasorigatame-sama. Sorry for troubling you two again. To think I would end up getting a short story collection when I originally wasn't even sure I'd be able to get a second volume published for this series, this is all thanks to your support, dear readers... Thank you very much! Luckily, the publisher still seems willing to let me continue writing, so I'll continue to be in everyone's care!

Well then, that's enough chatting. Coming up next is Volume 8, so let's meet again in the main series~

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Frog: one of the ways Japan's fascination with 3D characters manifests itself is through mascots commonly found outside pharmacies. Kowa Pharmaceuticals uses a frog mascot.
2. ↑ Katanuki(型抜き): an activity common at Japanese festivals where participants use a needle or a toothpick to carve a candy mold out of flour, starch or sugar to make shapes such as stars, animals or cherry blossoms, etc. Skillfully carved molds receive prizes.
3. ↑ Byoudou-in(平等院): a Buddhist temple located in the city of Uji in Japan. The most famous building in the temple is the Phoenix Hall(鳳凰堂) which is considered a national treasure.
4. ↑ Racoon dog(狸): known as the tanuki, a Japanese animal similar to badgers and racoons in appearance, known for mischief and shapeshifting in folklore. In this particular instance, Kuroe is using it as a reference to Tokugawa Ieyasu who was deified and worshiped.
5. ↑ Kotatsu(炬燵): is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, often built into the table itself. Kotatsu are used almost exclusively in Japan, although similar devices are used elsewhere.
6. ↑ Fundoshi(褌): also known as the Japanese loincloth, a type of traditional Japanese undergarment made from a length of cotton. In particular, it resembles a thong in the way the buttocks are exposed.
7. ↑ In Japanese, the kanji for "prank" is itazura(悪戯) which literally reads "malicious game."

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